DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 081 CS 507 696

AUTHOR Kaplan, George R.
TITLE Images of Education: The Mass Media's Version of America's Schools.
INSTITUTION Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, D.C.; National School Public Relations Association, Arlington, Va.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-937846-57-0
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 159p.
AVAILABLE FROM National School Public Relations Association, 1501 Lee Highway, Arlington, VA 22209 (1-9 copies, $14.00 each; 10-25 copies, $12.00 each; 26+ copies, $9.00 each prepaid); Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc., 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., #310, Washington, DC 20036 (same conditions).
PUB TYPE Books (010)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Images; Elementary Secondary Education; Government School Relationship; *Mass Media Role; News Reporting; *Public Education; *Public Schools; *School Attitudes; *School Business Relationship; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Media Coverage; Media Government Relationship

ABSTRACT

Offering insights and ideas for school leaders, the news media, and the public to consider, this book examines how the print and electronic media portray one of the crucial news stories of our time: the education of 50 million American youngsters. The book maintains that, while the school-media connection should be "a natural" for both sides despite the underlying incompatibility of a slow-moving story and a fast-breaking profession, the media provide only infrequent and perfunctory acknowledgment of the nation's school children and are poorly informed about education and schools. Chapters are as follows: (1) Dilemmas and Dimensions; (2) Journalism's Dirty Little Secret: Everybody's Wrong; (3) Crusaders, Paladins, and Their Civilizing Mission; (4) Names Make News; (5) The National Storyteller; (6) Television's Endangered Species; (7) The Indifferent Pundits; (8) The Great Cable Caper; (9) The Business Connection; (10) Between Two Hard Covers; (11) More Than a Newspaper, Less Than a Book; (12) Constant Companion, Minor Medium; (13) Message Pix Gotta Be Good; and (14) Learning about Learning in the Nineties. An epilogue, 121 references, and a 63-item bibliography are attached. (RS)

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Foreword by Fred W. Friendly

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Images of Education

The Mass Media's Version of America's Schools

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Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 0-937846-57-0

Images of Education: The Mass Media's Version of America's Schools is a joint publication of the National School Public Relations Association and the Institute for Educational Leadership and can be ordered from:

National School Public Relations Association
1501 Lee Highway
Arlington, VA 22209

or

Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc.
1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., #310
Washington, D.C. 20036

1–9 copies	$14.00 each
10–25 copies	$12.00 each
26+ copies	$ 9.00 each

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IMAGES OF EDUCATION

THE MASS MEDIA'S VERSION OF AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

GEORGE R. KAPLAN

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The National School Public Relations Association and the Institute for Educational Leadership are pleased to co-publish George Kaplan's *Images of Education: The Mass Media's Version of America's Schools.*

The nation's schools have been receiving unusually heavy coverage from the news media. Interrelated concerns about the quality of our schools and the nation's economic competitiveness have thrust education into the arena of public debate since the mid-1980s. More recently, President Bush's widely publicized *America 2000* strategy to "reinvent" the schools as well as the growing involvement of political and business leaders have intensified the print and broadcast media's interest in how America's children are being educated.

It is against this backdrop that George Kaplan explores this heretofore largely ignored but increasingly important issue. His analysis is provocative, timely, and informative. We believe that it makes a most valuable statement on a crucial yet underappreciated topic.

Though the views expressed by Mr. Kaplan may not be fully shared by our organizations, we are proud to publish this stimulating volume. *Images of Education* offers provocative insights and ideas for school leaders, the news media, and the consuming public to consider.

Joseph J. Scherer
Executive Director
National School Public Relations Association

Michael D. Usdan
President
Institute for Educational Leadership

FOREWORD

LONG AGO, WHEN TELEVISION WAS BUT A GLEAM IN A FEW PEOPLE'S EYES, *Variety*, the entertainment industry's weekly bible and often its soul, proclaimed, "The public will buy message 'pix' but they gotta be good." *Variety* shouted a mouthful, and not just about the visual media.

In *Images of Education*, George Kaplan has given us a disturbingly vivid portrayal of how today's print and electronic media are treating one of the crucial stories of our time: the education of 50 million youngsters. For the most part, they don't do it as well as they should. Fair and accurate messages about America's schools, both the good and the bad, aren't always getting through. The effects of this communications gap could be frightening.

Walter Lippmann wrote that the journalist's job was to provide a portrait of reality on which the citizen could act. The comprehensive analysis *Images of Education* provides—the product of countless hours of viewing and listening to television, films, and radio, of digesting newspapers and magazines, and of burrowing deeply into education's contemporary literature—yields an unsettling picture of how the education beat is covered. Among many other things, Mr. Kaplan is concerned, and justifiably so, about the sensational immediate driving out the long-term substantive—the tired stories of inept school boards, poorly prepared teachers, leaking classroom ceilings, overpaid custodians, drugs and crime in the stairwells and the playgrounds that customarily dominate the media's educational agenda. Lamentably, the media, all of them, offer us too little hard reporting and informed commentary about the imaginative, hope-inspiring solutions that are unfolding in cities and towns across the country.

George Kaplan's examination of education-oriented motion pictures, to take a glaring example of how one medium views the schools, shows us how films glorify heroic male characters—Robert Donat in "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" (1939), Glenn Ford in "Blackboard Jungle" (1955), Jon Voight in "Conrack" (1974), Edward Olmo in "Stand and Deliver" (1989), and Robin Williams in "Dead Poets Society" (1989)—while virtually ignoring the female role models who comprise all but a small fraction of the national teaching force. He quotes Martin Quigley's infamous defense of the film industry: "The entertainment picture is no place for social, political, and economic argument." But why shouldn't it be?

The television journalists, if that is not becoming an oxymoron, routinely neglect complex substantive news about education because there is such an acute shortage of air time. *Images of Education* generously spares the industry in not documenting the sad statistics on how few networks and local stations support a regularly scheduled education beat. Mr. Kaplan

has analyzed the output of the heavy-hitting newspaper pundits and columnists, and points out how ineffectively they use their space and influence to probe the ever-rising tide of educational dilemmas. The citizen needs to understand both the historical background and the many-sided ongoing social changes that affect the educational system before we as a society can work our way out of some of these seemingly intractable problems.

A growing number of competent reporters have began to dig deeply, sometimes brilliantly, into these gut issues, but many education writers are still shortchanging the developing story. The homework gap is not only in the classroom; it is also in the newsroom. And the media are not the only culprits. Many of education's top-of-the-line leaders persist in underestimating the crucial necessity of erecting bridges of understanding to our ever-more-potent mass communications media.

Recently I found myself conducting a seminar on education for a distinguished group of captains of industry in a large eastern city. As an opener, I asked if any members of my large panel of bankers, lawyers, and industrialists had children or grandchildren in public schools. None did, nor did the moderator, nor do many of the journalists and pundits who comment about great social issues. They may watch an occasional film or a television program, and they read the serious newspapers, but they (we) do not relate to why Johnny can't read or why Johnny or Janey's teacher can't live on what we pay her. Our image of public schooling is obscured by our field of focus. It is removed from the daily world of most of us. The picture of educational reality which the major news media deliver is too often neither serious nor reliable.

Author Kaplan is sympathetic to the media's problems, but he concludes that "Their (our) infrequent acknowledgement of the nation's 50 million school children is perfunctory and poorly informed and [has done] a disservice to our schools and to our children." But he also believes, as I do, that positive change can happen.

Images of Education will upset and anger many who read it, but there should be a place for it in every newsroom and every producer's office, and every school board member ought to study it—so that he or she will know how important it is to make clear sense of the facts the next time a reporter calls and says, "I just don't understand what's going on."

To quote this praiseworthy book, "The school-media connection should be a natural for both sides despite the underlying incompatibility of a slow-moving story and the appetite of a fast-breaking profession. The stakes alone should dictate a respectable priority." Too frequently they do not.

Fred W. Friendly
Director, Columbia University Seminars on Media and Society

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PROLOGUE

THE BUILDUP WAS SKILLFUL AND THE TIMING FLAWLESS. THE BUSH ADMINistration's unveiling of its "populist crusade" to change America's schools by the year 2000 was a foreordained winner. Discreet leaks to the nation's most influential communicators earlier in the week had signaled a dramatic new approach to schooling. And a White House setting, complete with a Presidential speech and a beaming First Lady, gave instant top-drawer legitimacy to *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, a crisp 34-page prescription "to make this land all that it should be."

It was a superbly orchestrated example of high-intensity media relations, a script that played out perfectly over an April weekend in 1991. The national newscasts spotlighted the new plan that Thursday evening, while the major newspapers dutifully front-paged and analyzed it the following morning. Punditry about schools hit epidemic levels on the morning and weekend TV talk shows. Not since the "Education Summit" of September 1989 had a brighter spotlight shone on how our children are educated.

In the excitement few of the media stars bothered to dissect the assumptions behind the ambitious new design. All agreed that a bold vision was overdue. But *America 2000*'s disputable messages passed largely unnoticed: its weighty constitutional implications, its preference for private education, its uncritical alignment with profit-oriented business interests, and its barely hidden skepticism of all of public education.

However it plays out in the 1990s, the new prospectus promises more than a mere reorganization of America's schools; it challenges some cherished American notions about democratic control of education. But for many analysts, neither content nor intent really mattered. The lure of the latest educational blueprint was that it had pre-empted a traditionally Democratic issue while demonstrating that George Bush did indeed have the foundation stone of a domestic policy, and an inexpensive one at that, 18 months before the 1992 elections.

America 2000 fairly exploded with arguments which demanded responses from today's school leaders. But the lessons of decades of school-media relations presaged a hesitant and insubstantial reaction from them. As always, they would underuse the mass media to tell their side of the story and, if *America 2000* fell short, they would be blamed and devoured by them.

The "crusade" had nearly everything going for it in the spring of 1991: Presidential backing, a media-wise leader and supersalesman in Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, national sentiment for low-cost school reform—and, in the shapeless bureaucratic mass that runs our schools, a perfect scapegoat that would not talk back. One vital question remained: Would *America 2000* display staying power in the media?

CHAPTER 1

DILEMMAS AND DIMENSIONS

THE COMMON WISDOM OF THE EARLY 1990S HOLDS THAT PUBLIC education in America is in deep trouble. The reports on its woes by the blue-chip commissions of experts that helped to trigger contemporary reform efforts are so voluminous that they could be sold by gross weight. They threaten to crowd leaders and policy analysts out of their offices. Wise observers of all stripes from celebrity pundits to business titans inundate us with terrifying forecasts and ready solutions. If this outpouring is to be believed, our long-successful system of free public schooling is collapsing around us, and our efforts to stop the fall have been unavailing.

But we don't fully trust, or even read, most of the reports. If we care at all, we can usually get the picture—or a stylized version of it—from the news media. Lamentably, however, the press is not a universally beloved institution. So we aren't sure exactly what to believe about what goes on behind the schoolyard fence or in the policy-makers' executive suites. We scan the headlines and a paragraph or two about the schools in our daily newspaper or we catch the occasional 90-second snippet about them on *News at Six*. They are not a central part of our adult lives, though, unless we work in the schools or are among the 20 percent of American adults with children of school age. Even then we are not agitated or particularly upset when the larger system falters. A few more of us may visit schools and talk with teachers these days, but our concerns center on our own children and their schools, not on how the whole educational apparatus is functioning.

And far from our collective consciousness is any sense that education is much more than classroom work in a public school building. This truism has yet to dawn on the policy-setters of our mass communications

media, who persist in ignoring the ever-expanding array of other forces and institutions that also educate the citizens of our postmodern era.

For far too many of us, the 12 or 13 years we spent in public school classrooms are better forgotten. If today's schools are as restrictive and uninspiring as we remember them from our schooldays, we do not want reminding. We don't need a bunch of high-paid media experts with doubtful educational credentials telling us that our children's schools don't even meet the standards of 20 or 30 years ago. Or that their inability to train a qualified workforce has hobbled the United States in the world's markets. Besides, the papers and screens have much meatier fare to offer—compelling subjects like war, sports, politics, and entertainment—that education's bland menu can't begin to rival.

If public education drifts somewhere between catastrophe and disaster, as so many Americans now believe, why aren't we storming the barricades and finding heads to roll? As "a nation of news junkies," the contention of Michael O'Neill, the former editor of the *New York Daily News*, shouldn't we be demanding a straight, unadorned account of whether one of our bedrock institutions still has its bearings? Or are we consigned to a hodge-podge of sometimes inspired reporting, outdated belief systems, and wildly uneven editorial commitment—all adding up to less comprehensive, less balanced coverage than the American people deserve and must have?

In his inaugural address in 1869, President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard University described his primary task as "the necessity of influencing opinion toward advancement of learning."[1] Though today's higher education leaders might place money-raising a notch higher, Eliot's message remains widely honored on university campuses. But it is somewhat less admired in public school circles, where latent suspicion of the news media and their motives too often limits open communication and, inevitably, the encompassing understanding that schools, decision-makers, and the consuming public must share. More's the pity, for we have become a nation of learners, a population eager to absorb and understand what we can of the massive flow of information that swirls about us.

For a society of learning addicts, though, our level of general knowledge is surprisingly shallow and selective. The couch potato strategist capable of drawing fine distinctions among sophisticated weapons systems in a desert 7,000 miles from home would be hard-pressed to identify the local school superintendent. After several weeks of heavy media play in 1986 when he was nominated to be Chief Justice, the name of 14-year Supreme Court Associate Justice William Rehnquist

went unrecognized by 60 percent of the participants in a public opinion poll.[2] A few months before the Persian Gulf War, in mid-1990, only six percent of the nation's under-30 generation could identify Richard Cheney, eight percent knew who Vaclav Havel and Thomas Foley were, and but 12 percent had heard of William J. Bennett, arguably education's best-known figure of the 1980s and the high-profile "drug czar" of 1989 and 1990.[3]

When the media are slow or reluctant to spot a developing story with ripe policy overtones, the issue understandably tends to slide away. The epochal unshackling of Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union scored relatively poorly in sustaining viewer interest on television and received less thorough coverage than they warranted in most local print media. For reasons best known to the journalistic profession, investigative and analytical reporting on the savings and loan scandals of the late 1980s and early 1990s was belated and undistinguished. Yet by most objective criteria, the former were the seminal events of the post-World War II era, while the S&L disaster will have an incalculably potent effect on national economic health for decades to come.

Nearly a decade after the flurry that greeted *A Nation at Risk*, the first manifesto of the education reform era, the impact of the media's treatment of our institutional learning enterprise remains hard to assess. The volume and quality of coverage are up substantially, but critical educational issues still beg for the thorough probing that less worthy but more glamorous subjects often receive. The schools and the media have never been a close fit, and our culture's emphasis on personalities and success, on how we meet statistical goals, does not stir the passions of education-beat journalists or the school people they cover.

Education's story has no unidentified flying objects or military victories, few scoops, and almost no shock value. It is seldom excessively adversarial. Everyone believes in good schools. There are no sensational revelations left after a generation of school-bashing. Nor does education offer real events to cover. The American public is not panting in anticipation of the U.S. Department of Education's annual report, "The Condition of Education."

Education is rarely a "hard news" story. It is oral and literary rather than visual. Its tale oozes; it doesn't break. It lends itself more readily to leisurely, theme-oriented reporting that sometimes seems to start and finish in the same place. With limited exceptions, school leaders shun the limelight. Comfortable in their in-house managerial roles but often uneasy as media personalities, they tend to believe the journalistic

adage that misdeeds are covered more intensively than good deeds. Like the Presidential aspirant who saw no sense in spending an hour courting a 25-year-old New Hampshire truck driver's vote, they want more bang for their media buck. By and large, they are baffled by the media's coolness to what they may consider to be landmark events and developments: improved reading scores, a decrease in school violence, a new wrinkle in school finance. But they do not lose sleep over the short shrift these items get; the media's point system is no mystery. Still, they aren't quite sure why they come up short.

Equally depressing for education's hypothetical fan club, the schools are too often left behind when larger issues and concepts reach the pages, screens, and airwaves of the mass media. Education still materializes too often in throwaway listings by politicians or talk-show guests (" . . . we must improve our deteriorating highways, health care, schools, housing . . .") and not often enough as a free-standing, many-sided endeavor that demands full-bodied commentary. Even the upscale population slice that reads the *Wall Street Journal* and watches documentaries on public television shows but limited interest in stories about schools and learning. Given a choice between pieces of roughly similar significance on, say, the repression of a freedom movement in a feudal monarchy and a shocker about a major shortfall in urban school funds, the national media will invariably give the foreign story higher billing.

If "the vacuum of public discourse is filled on the cheap," as media analyst Todd Gitlin asserts,[4] then the national conversation on the schools will also be a cut-rate product. What's more, it may become a tilted dialogue in which public education's institutional malaises take precedence over the limitless potential of individual Americans to become educated citizens.

In varying degrees, all of the media, especially newspapers, compete for the same coterie of upper-crust consumers.[5] Though good stories usually come first, whatever the subject, the subtle distinctions between "elite" news and "people's" stories are not hard to spot. Education is customarily an easy cull from the "elite" barrel and an uncomplaining space- or screen-filler in the community news segment. And yet, as Neil Postman has written, "The subject of education is vibrant and filled with challenge precisely because no one knows what it should be like in our own times. We are safe in assuming only that what we are presently doing is wrong . . ."[6]

At a policy conference a few years ago, a young educational leader excoriated a Washington newspaper publisher for the media's failure to

comprehend the transcendent role of the schools in our national life. The media had a powerful obligation to help the schools to regain public confidence, she contended, but reporting was overwhelmingly negative. How, she asked, can such educated and responsible people as editors and reporters so consistently downgrade the most important institution we have?

The publisher, a former education writer with a high regard for learning, replied in roughly these words: "We have no obligation to cover your story unless it's newsworthy. And we certainly don't have to put a positive face on news that doesn't deserve it. We aren't bound to support you, especially if you're doing a lousy job, nor do we need you to tell us what's important. You know, other fields can make a pretty good case that THEY are the indispensable story. Try health, the environment, the economy, national defense. Are they less important than the schools? Not by most standards—and they usually have fresh and informative stuff to cover."

Despite the put-down, the exchange was a standoff. The educator's question showed a naive sense of how the media decide what's news, but the publisher's response was both shallow and arrogant. The media in general, and more precisely the print outlets, *do* have a duty to follow education. Professional journalists have a large responsibility, as a matter of fact, to bird-dog one of our most important public institutions. And it is not up to the schools to dish up the media's fare. They can try to steer reporters to reportable happenings, but self-respecting journalists do not base their coverage on press releases or arranged interviews. Visits to exemplary school sites often resemble the excursions to Potemkin villages that Soviet officials used to stage to persuade western journalists of the greatness and fullness of life under communism. The education story is much larger and deeper than that. It has to be ferreted out, not because the media are altruistic but because the schools are such a vital part of national life.

Local newspaper editors and television news directors do not find the intramural machinations of the education world to be engrossing. In contrast to many other beats, the school watch has few locked closets. Nor does it have many problems with leaks. They are almost unknown because nearly all of the facts are freely available nearly all of the time. The schools would be hard-pressed to withhold very much.

For many of journalism's decision-makers, having an education beat does not obligate their paper or station to spread the good word about the learning enterprise. Rather, it is a hard-headed acknowledgment that the schools devour half or more of a community's public

income. By that criterion what really matters is whether tax-payers are getting their money's worth. The problems of the profession that may bedevil educators make no dent in the value system of the people who run the media. Teachers' strikes are about money, not about lack of respect for a neglected profession.

The school-media connection should be a natural for both sides despite the underlying incompatibility of a slow-moving story and the appetite of a fast-breaking profession. The stakes alone should dictate a respectable priority. That this has not usually been the case is a reflection of how we view education and the media. Though we commonly like the schools our children attend, we think that everyone else's are not nearly as good. And dependent though we may be on the mass media, our national suspicion of them is deep-seated. It is not reassuring to be reminded that the number of hours that national public television, traditionally billed as one of the nation's key out-of-school educational forces, gives in a typical year to reporting on the schools (as distinguished from its excellent documentaries and instructional fare) can be counted on a viewer's fingers.

Journalism's moguls profess a reverence for education as a high-priority news item. Disappointingly, the voice of the people does not always reinforce them. In a *Washington Post* poll of March 1990, during a period when no serious national security problems loomed and prospects for a "peace dividend" were briefly plausible, 34 percent of the respondents said that the nation's largest single problem was drugs. The poverty-hunger-homelessness trio registered 11 percent. Education did not reach double digits.[7] Except for events such as the "Education Summit" of 1989 and the release of the Bush Administration's *America 2000*, the volume of national media coverage has in recent years seldom reflected even this level of interest. When education does appear in the media, the consumer is often made to feel that this "high priority" story is receiving socially obligatory rather than spontaneous, warm-blooded coverage. There is too little verve or excitement in the reporting, whatever the medium.

Competent editors obviously do not make assignments on the basis of poll results, nor can stories be infused with enthusiasm when there is little to be enthusiastic about. It is good business to take account of the tastes and interests of consumers, though, and to do it with a bit of style. But as we exalt the virtues of youth in our popular culture, we display almost no respect for one of the main forces that have shaped our young people. Indeed, we seem sometimes to share a belief that

whatever success young people attain happens despite their 12–13 years of public education. When this attitude permeates large segments of society, editors are not receiving a message to expand coverage of the schools.

As journalists become a new elite in our media age, education seems to many Americans to be stumbling without apparent direction toward undefined new purposes and forms. Even the most vigorously pro-education publisher can see that linking the two is far from easy. Nearly ten years into the reform era, the reporter who covers the schools has what is still considered one of the lesser assignments on a typical family newspaper or TV station.[8] Editors believe, with some justification, that their readers and viewers are not poised breathlessly to receive the latest word on how the sixth-graders of William Howard Taft Middle School made out on their reading tests.

Education is not the only organized sector of American life that fails to stir strong public concern. Confidence in public-serving institutions, including the news media, has eroded since the Vietnam conflict and Watergate scandals.[9] Newscaster Walter Cronkite could have made a credible run for high office in the 1970s, and the media stars of the Persian Gulf War briefly captivated the world. But many of us see in the media " . . . a lack of fairness, questionable independence, inaccuracy and intrusiveness."[10] Echoing these judgments, *Time* found that the public often views journalists as "rude and accusatory, cynical and almost unpatriotic. They twist facts. They meddle in politics . . . invade people's privacy, and then walk off without regard to the pain and chaos they leave behind.[11]

If these opinions aren't devastating enough, more substantive ones are there for the asking. Education's wall plaster may be cracking and falling, yet other institutional structures may be in even worse repair. We don't have an accurate fix on how well the media are covering them. We can measure the volume, prominence of coverage, and calibre of reporting without knowing how much of what we get is the right stuff. Over a period of 25 years two German sociologists studied the coverage of technology in the German print media. They found increasingly negative reporting on air, water, and forest pollution, radioactive fallout, and fatal traffic accidents. This was clear-headed journalism that told it like it was. The only thing wrong was that the objective scientific indicators in these areas had not shown declines; the conditions had either improved or remained unchanged during that period.[12]

Unsurprisingly, these ambivalent public attitudes toward the media are often formed by impressions of personalities. In our media-aware

society, television news people who may be competent only in reading well and looking attractive may become national icons, while distinguished journalists who may be unhandsome or unable to compress their insights into 20-second bites are unknown and unappreciated. The only significant exception to these cliches is the Cable News Network with its coterie of bald heads, middle-aged men and women, and dumpy experts with raspy voices—and a reputation for objectivity and believability. Like very few others in any medium, CNN clearly separates fact from opinion and gives consumers "what they want—unvarnished, hard news . . . it not only pleases, it sells."[13]

Elsewhere in medialand, though, debate over the credibility of the press continues. Two of Washington's savviest analysts estimated in early 1990 that in the 1980–88 period " . . . the overall amount of press coverage of the press doubled." By the end of those eight years nearly three-quarters of the media's articles about themselves were negative ("media masochism," according to a third analyst).[14] This relentless analysis must tell us something about the media's sense of their own worth.

Compounding the education-media mismatch is the unwillingness or inability of both parties to seek a framework for local and regional trends—a grievous, if understandable, shortcoming. The decentralization of public education makes it a nettlesome sector to follow. This year's revolutionary practice in one school district may have been last year's failed experiment in another. In the early and mid-1980s the thrust of school improvement was from the states down; a few years later, we are witnessing a rush to site-based (local school) responsibility and management combined with national standards and tests and a marked distaste for education's bureaucracies and specialists at all levels. What is more, this panacea comes in several sizes and flavors. Parents and teachers are its core, but principals, superintendents, and school boards usually hold the purse strings. Diversity is everywhere, but often to no particular end. Reporting on it can lead to migraine headaches and nervous exhaustion.

The media's rolodexes bulge with the business cards of certified educational sages, but finding someone to put things into perspective is an exercise in frustration. Many of the nation's talented and dedicated publicists discourse knowingly and volubly on children, learning, and the schools without coming to grips with some of the key issues. We may find answers to education's dilemmas in school choice, vouchers, site-based management, school-business collaboration, or a dozen other cures—but what were the questions? Are we likely to find them in

interviews with professors or salaried school leaders or think-tank strategists or elected officials or foundation executives? Probably not. More than ever, it is up to the press, electronic and print, to locate education's real shortfalls and to place their dimensions in proper focus.

Searching the media for clues to the directions public education may take in the rest of this century may be an unsatisfying endeavor but it can sometimes be an exhilarating one. The volume of sustained coverage in urban and community newspapers has never been greater even though larger reckonings remain hard to grasp. We still face a daily hard core of stories that could have been written or broadcast as easily, and with as much relevance, in the 1960s as in the 1990s: items on creative teachers, financial crises, strikes, parent activism, and a host of always current but basically repetitive issues.

Perhaps that is all there is to tell. Sometimes, though, the media proffer exciting glimpses of larger educational worlds, or of currents and trends that hint at the shifting purposes and modes of the learning enterprise. Lurking behind today's stories on Japan's demanding schools or parental involvement or the business world's expanding roles are intimations that a more substantive and coherent account is emerging.

The task for educational journalism is not simply to ride popular bandwagons but somehow to capture the larger landscape—and to stay with it as it changes. The journalist seeking to report accurately and fully on education must understand the explicit ties that bind the schools to economic development, the real meaning of the sea changes occurring in the early 1990s in Kentucky, Chicago, and Rochester, New York, the evolving links between education and the human services, and, far from least, the fundamentally altered patterns of family life, especially in those corners of American society where poverty and failure are commonplace. This is a tall order, almost as demanding as coming to terms with the half-forgotten premises of our schools: that they further the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom by the nation's young people.

PROFILE

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Tom French: "The Story Is in the Classroom"

"THE FIRST DAY BEGINS WITH A SERIES OF SYMBOLIC HANDOFFS. Mothers, with children hanging close, appear at the door of the classroom. Melinda Galaher sees them and gets into position. Some children move forward automatically when they see her smile. Others hesitate and need a gentle push. Eventually, each leaves the arms of a parent, walks six inches or so, and enters the arms of a teacher."

"They have stepped into first grade."

Thus begins an account of the September-to-June passage of 24 children and the teacher who would teach them many things, especially how to read. Slowly, methodically, inexorably, the pupils of classroom B-4 of Mount Vernon Elementary School in St. Petersburg, Florida, learned that Mrs. Galaher could make reading a warm, feel-good experience. They responded as heroically, and sometimes as disappointingly, as six- and seven-year-old children can. When school let out for the summer, they were readers. And they would never forget a caring 44-year-old woman who shared their joys, their frustrations, and their ultimate achievement.

The acts of teaching and learning are widely overlooked in educational journalism. To Thomas French, a 33-year-old feature writer on the *St. Petersburg Times*, though, "there are no more important stories for any newspaper than what happens daily in the schools." Yet the notion of telling how an elementary school teacher guided her young charges into the world of words comes across as a prime exhibit of journalistic inspiration. Stories like this, a school-year-long series that topped 25,000 words, are as rare as penguins at the equator. Only a newspaper that combines size, prosperity, and a strongly felt responsibility to the community could begin to consider them.

Reporting like French's has a deceptively simple air. Learning to read is nearly as universal an undertaking as growing up. It is one of life's

givens, but we don't customarily remember how it happened—the agonies and the satisfactions. It takes a memory-jarring experience like reading Tom French's eight-part narrative to remind us that learning is not automatic (or greatly unchanged from our own student days), that a good teacher is a local treasure, and that the inside of a classroom is a critically important place in our scheme of things.

"Every day, Mrs. Galaher builds vocabularies by holding up cards with words written on them and asking her pupils to read the words aloud. Often, she will build sentences out of the cards. If the children don't know a word, she tells them to look at the first letter, then look at the rest of the sentence and try to think of what word would make sense."

We can remember through Tom French's descriptions how it was to learn from a gifted teacher who cared. We see how Mrs. Galaher anticipates crises, how she draws out reluctant learners and controls the overenthusiastic without squashing them, how she eases the adjustment of young children to a new world of school desks, cooperation in small groups, and no naps. By Thanksgiving time, the first-graders are proudly reading to the school's scarcely younger kindergartners. And adult readers of the *Times*'s series are developing a sense of the real stakes of educational reform. Children may ultimately become the educated human resource that business-oriented reformers expect the schools to produce, but they are first and foremost small-sized people with huge needs.

As the school year advances, Mrs. Galaher listens to hundreds of young problems. She faces daily realities of teaching the offspring of collapsing marriages and dissolving, or dissolved, families. A child's father dies. A once-unpromising student must transfer just as he shows signs of progress. Above all, Melinda Galaher must adapt. Nothing is as it appears. The unpredictable is the norm. Tom French captures it all.

By mid-winter, "The children are learning the basics of punctuation. Their vocabularies are mushrooming. They're mastering rules that help them 'decode' unfamiliar words. They're undergoing test after test to see whether they're actually comprehending the rush of words and sentences passing before their eyes."

The series seems to materialize without context—and gets away with it. There isn't a hint of the condescending educationese and social science jargon that still afflict so much writing on education, even by journalists. Free of ponderous references to the politics of education and the grandiloquent imperative of school restructuring, French's account

dips far beneath conventional surfaces to convey an uncluttered look at how one class in one Florida school is doing its collective job. Surprisingly at a time when currents of change are supposed to be swirling through the schools, nearly every tool and technique that Mrs. Galaher employs is as old as she is. And they work.

The investment and implicit commitment of the *St. Petersburg Times* are extraordinary, even for one of the largest and most successful papers in the southeastern United States. Managing Editor Michael Foley and Deputy Managing Editor Neville Green encouraged Tom French at every turn, and his incessant probing into the soul of the area's schools reflects their backing.

When the school year ended, French wrote of how Mrs. Galaher had taught her pupils "the lesson upon which the rest of their education would be built." Not only were the children transformed into readers; they progressed as learning, thinking people. "She guided them through addition and subtraction. She taught them a song about unicorns. She had them build clay dinosaurs. She dazzled them with facts about the rings of Saturn . . . She showed them how to harness their own imaginations and write their own stories . . . She examined their scars and bore witness to their loose teeth . . . Always, she listened to them . . . they told her their secrets and she kept them."

"Then, suddenly, the year was over."

As he fine-tuned a new series on a quartet of high school students, Tom French reflected that schools are not pushing students to think for themselves. Repeatedly, he encounters high-schoolers who already see themselves adjusting to a society of double images. They feel entrapped in a system that tightly controls their freedom. Moreover, as their fictional peers in the cult film "Heathers" had discovered, they were already entered in "the stressed out sweepstakes." Somehow, parents and the large public don't seem to recognize this. Tom French gets it all.

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CHAPTER 2

JOURNALISM'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET: EVERYBODY'S WRONG

AFTER VETERAN PUBLICIST FRANK MANKIEWICZ LEFT THE PRESIDENCY of National Public Radio in 1983, he told *Time* that "sooner or later everybody will know the dirty little secret of American journalism, that the reports are wrong. Because sooner or later everybody will have been involved in something that is reported. Whenever you see a news story you were part of, it is always wrong."[1]

Even in the best of journalistic times, few subjects receive what their partisans consider to be accurate and balanced coverage. A reporter's rendition of a set of incontestable facts can infuriate advocates who may see the issue in totally different terms. And it is equally hard for journalists to include everything that belongs in a story. Seymour Hersh, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize whose decades-long fascination with the career of Henry Kissinger was a journalistic legend, estimated after completing a critical tome on the former diplomat that he had managed to get about five percent of the story.

Perceptions of this type come with the journalist's territory. It is a safe bet that the technology-laden media of the 21st century will be as vulnerable as were the editors and reporters of horse-and-buggy days. A substantial body of well-regarded scholarly work, typified by Herbert Gans's *Deciding What's News*,[2] has only partially succeeded in balancing the forces and pressures that affect the mix. The proliferation of research institutes and advocacy groups on the news, from the conservative Accuracy in Media (AIM) to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) on the left, with the academic or research groups grouped loosely in the middle, has occurred precisely because of a shortage of common criteria on what makes news.

In contrast to science or medicine, which often require specially qualified experts to decipher their messages, education is a familiar

subject. When we read, watch, or listen to a story on education, we have some kind of framework in which to fit it. Yet questions persist. Are the media giving merely the top or an official version of the news, or are they getting to the heart of the matter? What are they doing right? Wrong? Are they missing important stories?

At one time or another, the print and broadcast media somewhere in America have located every theme that could conceivably register with education-aware audiences. They have overworked some but downplayed others. The lure of education's periodic fads is irresistible to some reporters. Others cover routine school board meetings as if they were the Congress of Vienna. Certainly, no metropolitan-area education reporter can systematically cover the entire beat. To do so would be to probe the daily lives of thousands of children and hundreds of teachers—and still not get the whole story.

In a journalistic dreamworld unfettered by tight budgets and pressures of time, reporters would expose themselves to education's many real dilemmas with the intensity that most of them displayed in getting through college and into their jobs. They would read the education reform reports, not just the executive summaries or wire service accounts. Their understanding of the forces affecting schooling would proceed from an in-depth knowledge of social and economic policy. As trained professionals, they would steep themselves in the history of education. And they would know what is happening in the next town, the state capital, Washington, and the principal research centers. They would religiously read ED-LINE, *Education Week*, and the *Phi Delta Kappan*.

"The problem, then, always, and everywhere, is context."[1] If education reporting lacks one critical ingredient, it is explicitly that. Too much education coverage treats ordinary trends and events as if they were scoops freshly minted for the *Daily Gazette*'s front page or the lead story on *Eyewitness News at 11*. Lacking the perspective that properly situates a school story, editors and reporters are constantly guilty of a "square one" or "ground zero" mentality when it comes to education. If it hasn't happened before in Ourtown USA, it hasn't happened anywhere. This is a correctable deficiency, but it will take time and work.

All news, including the detailed treatment that appears in the encyclopedic *New York Times*, on the slow-moving Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), or in CNN's 24-hour coverage, is necessarily abridged, simplified, and isolated from its natural setting. Bill Moyers has observed that TV's principal enemy is brevity. Walter Cronkite has

spoken of "distortion by compression." Journalists are not historians with the time and resources to compose the definitive story on anything. Nevertheless, they devote far less attention than they should to continuing, "developmental" themes that cry out for center-stage exposure. Long after they became newsworthy, too little notice has fallen on such items as these:

- *Alternative routes to reform.* Until the late 1980s control of the school improvement movement was firmly in the hands of traditionalists who, in the spirit of *A Nation at Risk*, espoused an across-the-board, top-down, state-based tightening up of the old-fashioned practices of our once-respected public schools. Almost invisibly since then, though, reformers have begun to pirate such once-shunned "progressive" modes as ungraded classes, year-round schooling, interdisciplinary learning, development of the whole child, youth tutoring youth, a national curriculum, out-of-school experiences, and a host of others. This trend is reminiscent of what happened in the 1970s and 1980s when the nation came to accept as legitimate many of the living styles and values that stamped the 1960s as a crossover time in our social development. Are today's schools headed in a similar direction? Shouldn't we be kept abre t of the burgeoning alternative education community that ha urtured these departures from the prosaic? Do we really th k that today's parents know much about education?
- *Critical thinking and problem-solving.* Our schools remain in the grip of credentialism, numbers, and demonstrable evidence, such as test scores, of educational accomplishment. This fixation on quantification will neither enrich the culture nor improve the workings of our society. A key to achieving both will be the ability of the next generation to apply higher-order thinking skills and sophisticated problem-solving techniques to the more complex issues that face us. These subjects are difficult to cover and are tougher to quantify. Research on them is taxing and often unfulfilling, and bringing them to life is an arduous assignment, especially on television, a visual medium. But it is vital to understand the effects of these essential intellectual skills on the development of students.
- *The matter of choice.* The implications of the school choice movement in its many forms are awesome and disturbing. Despite voluminous and ever-expanding coverage, the numerous ver-

sions of choice are improperly understood, most pronouncedly in economically backward communities. Choice may offer a chance for real change, but it could also speed the disintegration of already reeling urban school systems and provide inadequate replacements. The 1990 elections were indecisive on what supporters of choice were earlier calling a tidal wave. When the media cover this multifaceted question with its connotations for social policy in general and schools in particular, the public is led to believe that choice, including the selection of private schools, is inevitable and that only the details need working out. The subject doesn't yet stimulate what President Eisenhower would have called "a good growl." The public schools have few defenders in this "debate." But to many Americans choice still refers to the abortion issue or, in some parts of the country, banning or permitting lethal weapons. That it is the label of a potentially monumental educational reform remains widely unknown.

- *Becoming Number One.* At a carefully planned point in his 1990 state-of-the-union address, President Bush promised that America's students would lead the world in mathematics and science by the turn of the century. How reachable is this goal? Is being number one either necessary or realistic? The media and their consumers have so far meekly accepted a top-down agenda of national educational goals proposed by the state governors reinforced by the Bush Administration's *America 2000.* Governors are justly known for their political and managerial skills, not for well-considered perceptions of what constitutes a good education. And President Bush passed his student days in posh private schools and at Yale University. The media should surely question the assumptions that guide such goal-setting while ventilating the federal role in a time of crisis in the schools and holding the Presidential feet to the fire.
- *Student attitudes and values.* Evidence abounds that American children are indifferent to learning. As the Josephson Institute of Ethics puts it, today's young people "have severed themselves from the traditional moral anchors of American society—honesty, respect for others, personal responsibility, and civic duty."[1] Many of today's students are losing interest and losing ground. They are spurred to work only in order to acquire. "I'm my own mentor" sums up the cynical, self-centered value system of countless young people. It is difficult for anyone, let alone a

stranger, to discuss motivation with school-age children, and the matter of "values education" as a mandate for the schools stirs feverish controversy. Nevertheless, this is one of the main stories that educational journalism has bypassed. For their efforts to illuminate these failings the mass media deserve a D-minus.

- *"Partnerships" with business.* The generosity to the schools of business firms from pizza franchises to IBM and GE has drawn heavy and generally uncritical coverage. Their commitments of money, equipment, and instructors have also helped to polish corporate images. Questions arise that the media's mostly one-sided treatment has left largely unreported. How compatible is the profit motive with the larger mission of the schools? Should these "partnerships" entitle corporations to share in the management of public education? Would it really be feasible, as U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander has suggested, for IBM, Xerox, and Burger King to run "public" schools? Is business support turning public education into a 12-year training camp or minor league for the private economy? The media have failed so far to take an objective look at any of these matters. The story needs repeated airing and some serious journalistic muckraking.
- *The quality of our teachers.* By no plausible criteria are today's teachers anywhere near the best and the brightest college graduates in the country. Capable, energetic, and dedicated though they may be, many may not have the preparation and knowledge that the information-expanding years ahead will demand of them. They can teach what they know, but do they know enough? Instead of publicizing alternative credentialing paths for new teachers, which yield small numbers of talented young people or career-switchers who too often become short-termers in the schools, the media should be scrutinizing an entire profession. They should be looking hard at the state of teacher education, how new teachers are recruited and selected, the conditions in which they work, the system of rewards, the pervasive frustrations of an underrated profession, and at prospects for change. With their inspirational reports of a few investment bankers, Peace Corps alumni/ae, and Marine officers who have become teachers, the media are avoiding the gnawing problems of a huge profession in confusion and flux. ***Education Week*** and

Teacher have dug deeply and brilliantly into these matters, but they are trade publications preaching to the converted.

Reporters have won awards covering some of these subjects. But around the nation some education writers are still missing the story behind the news. Repeatedly, their digging fails to illuminate such obvious issues as what school restructuring means and what lies behind it, where educational research stands and its usefulness to the schools, and why, not just whether, thousands of high school students reach graduation time ignorant, uncaring, barely literate, and unable to perform simple calculations. Far too many reporters and editors shower their audiences with anecdotes and true-to-life vignettes while neglecting the larger trends that illustrate their meaning. They may have a cramped vision of what public education is about.

Education reporters are not alone in shortchanging gut themes. At the top of the ladder, in the heady ambiance of national and foreign affairs reporting, the household names of journalism frequently miss developing stories of enormous potential impact. For a profession that should have been at the top of its form, the reporters' trade has come up woefully short in recent years. Journalism's name-brand superstars have simply missed what Reese Cleghorn of the *Washington Journalism Review* called "tidal-wave stories . . . detected only after their foamy desks were floating on the crest."[5] Although their reporting was sometimes outstanding once the stories were broken by often unknown reporters from obscure publications, the media's "who's who" were largely oblivious to the forces powering these stories.

The rapid disintegration of communism came as a nearly complete surprise to all but a handful of energetic, hard-digging analysts. It was left to low-circulation newspapers and journals, some of them on the nation's impotent political left, to spot the savings and loan disaster. An unknown writer named Andre Shashaty of the trade publication *Multi-Housing News* was the first to uncover the scandals of the Reagan-era Department of Housing and Urban Development. A Beirut newspaper broke the alarming Iran-Contra story, which was germinating undetected under the noses of a huge scandal-seeking Washington-based media corps. And in 1990 the press was caught drowsing when Iraq devoured Kuwait. As Cleghorn points out, "You can finish this do-it-yourself confessional list. It is devoid, for instance, of major developments in the sciences that went undetected by the press."[6]

The selection of education stories poses tricky choices for editors. (Adlai Stevenson on editors: " . . . men who separate the wheat from the chaff, and then print the chaff.") The issue of dropouts, to take a long-time favorite, has a permanent immediacy that makes it difficult to ignore. Tension and drama are built into the story. Moreover, accounts of life among school dropouts often come complete with comminglings of anomie, drugs, violence, and fractured families that make for arresting reading and TV viewing. Some actually turn into warm human interest stories with positive outcomes, such as the tale of how a New York City counselor managed to induce a junior high school dropout back to the classroom by guiding him through a series of ticklish adjustments.

Such stories keep a reporter's feet wet. But they also stimulate questions about context. Do education journalists know that, despite a supposed 30 percent annual dropout rate from American high schools, more young people are completing 12 years of schooling than at any time since 1940? Have editorial writers and commentators ever considered that some young people might be better off "stopping out" or leaving traditional schooling altogether, perhaps for an apprenticeship, at 15 or 16? Is it always advisable to drag a disaffected young person back into the setting that may have caused the alienation?

One of journalism's favorite indoor sports is educationist-bashing. Many columnists and editorial-writers delight in targeting public school officialdom, an always-inviting victim that is usually oversized, job-secure, and rarely disposed to fight back. When the media do praise a school official, the fortunate functionary is customarily singled out as an exception in an otherwise dreary lot. But the halo is never securely fastened; today's sterling educator can easily become tomorrow's ingrate. Superintendent John Murphy of Prince George's County, Maryland, a major suburban Washington jurisdiction, registered one of public education's noteworthy performances of the 1980s in transforming a sluggish, non-achieving system into one of the nation's most innovative and admired. When details of his contract renewal talks led to public misunderstanding, he was quickly labeled a greedy bureaucrat and perhaps not all that great a reformer. He later took a job in North Carolina. Murphy's case is one of many of its type.

For journalists who do not aspire to posts in Washington or Tokyo and are not susceptible to the virus of political reporting, an education assignment has much to recommend it. The satisfaction of getting an important story right rather than wrong is considerably more attainable in education than in most fields. Most stories can stand without value

judgments or difficult choices as to priorities or sources. In contrast to nearly all other specialties, women are anything but second-class citizens on the education beat, where they comprise the majority of working professionals. Pack reporting of the type that reporters on the city hall and crime beats regularly endure is usually avoidable on the school beat. Deadline pressures are mild, sometimes invisible. A nearly ideal posting.

These are attractive advantages, but nagging frustrations persist. For some reporters, there simply isn't anything really new in education. Cruising a beat that will almost never spring a surprise and where the "dirty little secret: everybody's wrong" applies chiefly in a nonthreatening fashion hardly arouses reportorial ardor. While no journalist wants to be wrong, the more ambitious ones actively court intellectual risk and stimulation. They thrive on the raw controversy, confrontation, and ethical dilemmas that so seldom roil the surfaces of public education. Spotting sloppy research in a history book or tracking the inconsistencies of a PTA activist somehow does not measure up to catching the mayor with a hand in the cash box.

CHAPTER 3

CRUSADERS, PALADINS, AND THEIR CIVILIZING MISSION

TODAY'S JOURNALISTS, SAYS MEDIA CRITIC PETER STOLER, "SEE THEMselves as crusaders, paladins who maintain the right with pens instead of swords. . . . watchdogs to keep a careful eye on public and corporate officials, guardians of the rights and liberties of the people. . . . the good guys. . . . protectors of the weak and powerless, as righters of wrongs, as tellers of the truth. . . . the bringers of messages that must, pleasant or not, be heeded."[1]

Few reporters would dispute this flattering description. Most could be persuaded to admit, with little modesty, that they occupy one of the last outposts of purity in a corrupt world. In the media-driven culture of the 1990s, they may be dead right. Like it or not, our judgments and choices on matters of public policy are decisively informed by the versions of those issues that reporters give us in the pages of our daily newspapers. Their potential for informing the policy-shaping process may be incalculable; their thunderbolts have megapower.

If the news media functioned in a rational fashion, the education beat would be a dream assignment, if a taxing one, for any newspaper's top reporters. The subject matter is topical, tinged with controversy, and very accessible. Our schools and colleges devour more public monies than any other public sector. The whiff of scandal is ubiquitous. At one time or another, our sprawling educational enterprise with its 105,000 schools, 46 million students, 2.2 million teachers, and 15,500 school districts engages the energies of nearly one-third of our population. And the success or failure of this massive endeavor, as we are reminded hourly, will have a crucial impact on the American future. How could any journalist resist an opportunity to chronicle and interpret this vast story?

If these lures don't suffice, the screen can quickly display a host of equally compelling alternatives. The very structure of contemporary public education offers fields fertile enough for any future Pulitzer Prize-winner to plow. The hustling education reporter can tap creatively and endlessly into underexploited sociological themes of limitless impact: the role of undereducated parents, group behavior at nearly all societal levels, the adjustment of students from other countries and cultures, inter-racial stress, and the ties between schools and the economy.[2] The economics of education, often presented as a dismal story and thus widely misunderstood, poses a constant challenge. For the big-city reporter with a bent for investigative journalism, a smorgasbord of opportunities ranging from petty negligence to fiscal misfeasance and serious criminal behavior in the schools is nearly always within reach. Even in seemingly tranquil times, intrepid education reporters can cover a span of useful stories that few of their peers can match.

Yet the education beat lacks prestige. Though some papers grudgingly accord it nominal professional respect, it bears the label of being a beginner's job, and thus one of the least enviable assignments on most newspapers and local television stations. This view finds an echo in the education reporters themselves, who normally prefer to think that they are en route to more coveted berths on, for example, the business or political desk. Or even the police beat. These movements, any reassignments in fact, are usually referred to as promotions.

Although the field is graced with a few well-recognized education-focused journalists, the door to the beat is customarily a revolving one. Those who stay usually believe that they are performing a kind of journalistic good deed. Many others are impatient to get on with their careers and view education as a dead end, at best a rite of passage. This often means branching out or moving on into specialties that are less familiar to readers than is education. For most reporters, reducing the arcana of science to everyday language or probing behind the scenes of a hotly contested political race is more satisfying than covering school board or PTA meetings or describing the cumbersome progress of curricular reform. Or, perhaps more frustrating, dealing with bland functionaries in sodden bureaucracies.

Journalists who retain a strong commitment to reporting on the schools are not numbered among their papers' and stations' big-name players. Even in newspapers in large cities with crumbling school systems (and with good reporting on education, as in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *New York Newsday*), education reporters rank low

in an invisible but operative pecking order. However dramatic or urgent their pet issues may loom in their minds, even their best stories are too frequently shunted to inconspicuous locations in the paper, held back for a day or two, or edited to the near-vanishing point. But these perils bedevil journalists of all specialties. Outstanding reporting on important matters will usually find a prominent place in the paper whatever the day's news priorities may be.

Reporters who specialize in education are not sharply distinguishable from their peers in other departments. Like many fledgling journalists who have begun their careers since the mid-1970s, especially after coverage of the Watergate events had so vividly glamorized the calling, they came ready, they thought, to bare corruption and help create a more just society. These remain elusive goals, but their pursuers were and are impressive, persistent professionals. Well-trained if not always well-educated, and imbued with a unique brand of middle-class populism, they were impatient to get cracking. But they were not inspired by their daily confrontations with the cautious, even somnolent, school bureaucracies, ill-informed elected governing boards, and unrevealing press conferences they encountered in the 1970s. This was not their idea of an ideal assignment, or even of a necessary professional apprenticeship, particularly when the competition for the job had been so strenuous in the first place.

Education journalists who have somehow overcome or never developed these attitudes often find their beat to be a gratifying, if taxing and underappreciated, one. But certain anomalies and inconsistencies persist. While the good reporters strive to be fair, some cannot escape a gnawing suspicion that they are consorting with authority figures, notably school officials and board members, who are not their intellectual equals. This unspoken assessment sometimes displays itself in a condescending attitude that can upset the fragile balance between reporter and regular source. Even under this kind of stress, though, reporters who get honest answers to their questions come to value and protect their connections. But excessive protection can also lead to "clientitis," a soft spot for the folks they cover. Few reporters will admit to the affliction, but in varying degrees it insinuates itself into the psyches of all but the bloodless few.

Some education reporters thus find themselves curiously fragmented: instinctively sympathetic to public education but ambivalent about its performance and the people who run it. That many reporters are themselves parents of school children and concerned with classroom matters on a continuing personal basis may further cloud what should

be a clear picture of events in the schools. Their children's sometimes hair-raising tales of chaos in the classroom may pull them in one direction, while the next day's enthusiastic recounting of a satisfactory day of learning may have an opposite effect. Most likely, too, with most members of the fourth estate having achieved an adequate standard of living in recent years, the children of newspaper reporters attend suburban rather than inner-city schools and bring that perspective to the supper table.

A prime requirement for any reporter is that he/she be simultaneously inquisitive and informed. Nearly all education reporters register high on the curiosity scale, but many fall far short in preparing for the job. They come to their assignments adequately briefed on the precise issues to be addressed but in many cases distressingly poorly prepared to scratch beneath the surface and frame day-to-day coverage in some kind of balanced perspective.

A stark example of this failing of educational reporting was the greeting accorded *A Nation at Risk* in May 1983. A pivotally important document that is widely (if somewhat inaccurately) credited with kicking off the school reform movement of the 1980s and beyond, *A Nation at Risk* was almost unanimously hailed in the press as an urgent, long-needed call to arms. It was surely that and more. But the analytical coverage and editorial commentary that welcomed it were largely uncritical even though no subject could have been more familiar, and therefore open to serious probing, than public education. Even President Reagan's irrelevant bromides about school prayer and educational vouchers, neither of which was mentioned in the report, went largely unobserved in the hullabaloo over what was universally depicted as a pathfinding educational manifesto.

Much of the job of reporting on the schools, in 1983 as today, consists of attending conferences and meetings, digesting and discarding press releases, and wading through well-advertised reports of the *Nation at Risk* genre. At the time *A Nation at Risk* appeared, though, reporters were not yet surfeited with the weekly deluge of landmark reports on school improvement that threatened to bury journalists and scholars of educational policy by the mid-1980s. Receiving a report of this character was still a somewhat rare experience for most education reporters and editors. That it came from a commission appointed by an administration publicly dedicated to scuttling the federal role in education made it instantly controversial. Moreover, *A Nation at Risk* was a markedly conservative statement, unanimously approved by a Presidential commission, that sidetracked urban education, teachers, gover-

nance, and the still-overpowering issue of equity in education while envisaging little need for more than superficial adjustments in the structure of schools. At 36 pages of luridly-phrased accusations about the schools, it was, or should have been, a fat target for journalistic sharpshooters.

A Nation at Risk eventually stirred scattered criticism from the media. Most of the more focussed reports that followed its highly touted appearance gauged the nation's educational risks in quite different terms. But the bulk of the journalistic analysis of *A Nation at Risk* and the reports that followed throughout the 1980s lacked even a rudimentary historical base. At almost no time in the editorial awakening that followed the report's scathing charges did the media display more than passing awareness of the waves of reform that have regularly washed over American public education.

In praising a manifesto that urged more homework for the nation's schoolchildren, the journalists failed to do their own. Otherwise diligent reporters and editorial commentators simply ignored the informative and easily available works of Lawrence Cremin, Diane Ravitch, Charles Silberman, David Tyack, Michael Katz, and Jonathan Kozol, to mention but a sampling of those whose work would have enlightened coverage of education's current predicaments. All too few seem to have bothered to venture into their newspapers' morgues. Yet these same papers routinely offer voluminous background detail on dozens of other subjects. In the summer of 1990, dailies throughout the country printed reams of excellent background copy that provided the historical and geographical backdrop to the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait within days of the event. Education evidently does not merit such support.

Perhaps the disparity says more about editorial priorities than it does about beat reporters. But the same reporters might not even have known where and how to locate pertinent information on educational improvement. At a 1989 conference on educational research and the press, Edward Fiske, then of the *New York Times*, and Amy Stuart Wells mentioned "... the most obvious consequences of the press relying on inexperienced education reporters who lack some background in the issues and research literature in education." "These reporters," they noted, "might not be able to ask intelligent questions about research findings. They might not know how to distinguish the good stuff from the junk, and sometimes they don't even know news when they see it."[3]

If this is a widespread condition within the profession, then several fundamental questions arise. Does it suffice for reporters to stick to the

facts as they appear? If reporters don't know how to dig for a well-rounded story in an era of "infoglut," how can we trust anything they write about the schools? Why should we depend on such reporters for defensible analyses of, say, a conference on depression among elementary school students or a new era in parent-teacher contacts? Even more relevant, are today's beat reporters likely to question education's barnacled assumptions and to avoid the seductive path to reductionism?

The answers are generally positive. Most education journalists do the right things. Some journalistic tyros and dolts miss the story, but others see far beneath the clouded top of the news and into the heart of the issue.

For writers who like to poke below the surface world of press releases and staged events, a posting on the school beat can be an agonizing yet fulfilling tour of duty. The most successful among them almost uniformly endorse the wisdom of an oft-expressed but too frequently ignored maxim for covering the schools: Wherever possible, do it from the inside. The classroom, not the school board meeting or the governor's office, is where schooling happens. The most valid images of education that the media can offer are those that come the closest to spotlighting children and teachers at work. At first blush, the best medium for getting close to the action would seem to be television with its unobtrusive camcorders and its familiarity to children. Video technology has become so ubiquitous in American life that few children are any longer self-conscious while being filmed. But the bites and snippets from the classroom that make it to *Evening Edition* or *News Around the Town* often function on the home screen as scenic background for a talking reporter whose presence overwhelms the core story. Too often, the competition for air time leaves even the most newsworthy items on education on TV's equivalent of the cutting room floor; this is far less likely to happen in most newspapers.

Donald Fry of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, urges education reporters "to get inside the living whale and look around." Coverage in depth does not depend on being "whisked through on the arm of an assistant principal" but on heading to the action—lurking in the cafeteria and the parking lot, and standing beside open hallway doors or, better yet, focussing on how a small number of students actually learn. Both Fry and Roy Peter Clark, Associate Director of The Poynter Institute, cite the work of Tom French of the *St. Petersburg Times*, who observed the classes of a first-grade reading teacher over the course of a school year. The result was a series of insight-laden pieces in which the writer incorporated classroom observa-

tion, gentle questioning, and interviews with the teacher.[4] Like Emily Sachar, a *New York Newsday* reporter who took a year's leave of absence to teach in a New York City intermediate school, French covered an important continuing story with depth and precision.

The merits of invading the classroom constitute an article of faith in any responsible discussion of the education beat. Marvin Mencher of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism chides writers who avoid classrooms and schools, while James Killackey of the Oklahoma City *Oklahoman*, a former Ford Foundation Fellow in Educational Journalism who later became president of the Education Writers Association, writes, "The absolute worst problem for education coverage is that education writers don't spend enough time in the schools."[5]

These exhortations are solidly grounded, but life as an education writer has other, equally demanding sides. When he was the principal education writer for the *Los Angeles Times* (before being *promoted* to the Washington bureau and an assignment to cover the Supreme Court), David Savage estimated that he spent one-third of his time on local issues, one-third on state-level matters, and the remaining third on national issues and trend stories—a breakdown that permitted this excellent reporter far too little classroom time in the 500 school districts the *Times* was then monitoring. Nevertheless, building-level coverage is becoming a permanent feature in most papers. Intrepid young reporters from some, like the *Spokesman-Review* of Spokane, Washington, have actually enrolled in high school and produced moving accounts of unruliness and the use of drugs and liquor by students. The *Spokesman-Review*'s "student" was approached about buying drugs.[6] Though it raises ethical questions, such intrepid reporting is a rarity in covering the schools. The field needs more journalists who are ready to take chances to nail stories that count.

PROFILE

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The Good Gray Lady Goes to School

THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER OF RECORD, THE ONE THAT RUNS SOME of the news that's fit to print and some of the other kind as well, is staking out a preeminent position in covering education. Always sensitive to national educational trends, the *New York Times* has decisively expanded its reporting on the city's decaying schools. The result, as displayed in the country's most respected daily newspaper, has been an absorbing, frequently gut-wrenching chronicle of a system plagued by every disaster known to urban education.

The *New York Times* has been the subject of several weighty histories in the past ten years. None of them grant even glancing recognition to the paper's buildup of educational coverage. Yet since the late 1980s the vast potential of the *Times* to provide a multi-dimensional examination of public education has neared realization. By 1991 it was difficult to imagine how any daily newspaper could do a better job.

The forms and virtues of the *Times*' treatment of education are many. Such local stories as the titanic struggle between the principals and the chancellor (superintendent), the issues and dismal voter turnout for school board elections, or reports of corruption in the system's decentralized districts, for example, receive full and minimally judgmental play on a nearly daily basis, often on the front page, where competition for space is brutal. Similarly, such items of wider concern as state court decisions on school financing and the findings of various reform-oriented national commissions do well in the daily fight for news hole space. The *Times* often prints extended excerpts, even on days when dramatic events on other fronts offer overpowering arguments for dominating the paper.

Every Wednesday the *Times* religiously allots at least one page, and frequently two or three, to items on children, learning, and schools; sometimes, they share space with stories on post-secondary subjects. On a fairly typical Wednesday in 1990, a special report on the important whole-child-focused work of Dr. James P. Comer of Yale University

began with a boxed two-column spread on page one and continued at length in the metropolitan section. Altogether, not counting a large photograph, the story ran nearly 60 column inches. In the same day's paper was an op-ed commentary by writer/TV producer Hodding Carter (the son of the famous Mississippi editor whose coverage of segregation in the 1950s was one of print journalism's landmark triumphs) on the flight of rich children from public schools; a detailed account of the stewardship of the outgoing president of the city's board of education; an analytical report from Moscow on allowing religious education in Soviet schools; and straight news stories on the controversial departure of the president of the University of Utah (over the issue of research on nuclear fission) and on the naming of a new president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. All of this on a day that featured no important breaking educational story.

Four days later, the hefty Sunday *Times* registered a performance of similar distinction. The *News of the Week in Review* ran a full column on prospects for reforming the process for selecting members of the Board of Education, and, as it had done every week since the 1970s, carried the weekly paid column of the American Federation of Teachers in which its president, Albert Shanker, dilates on current topics. On that day, Shanker decided that the time for the message of a new book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, which calls for eliminating school bureaucracies and putting schools into open market competition, had not arrived. Elsewhere in the Sunday edition were reports from nine colleges and universities, a regular Sunday feature, and, in a burst of civic pride, a long cover profile in the prestigious *New York Times Magazine* assessing Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez's first year in office, complete with two full-page color photos of the dynamic school leader.

Out of this variety and depth emerges a picture of the nation's major journalistic power working to keep education at or near the forefront of popular attention. Moreover, while it deploys its unmatched resources, the *Times* treats its readers as the sophisticated citizens they are. Whether reporting on the problems of gifted children or on violence in the schools, it manages to present its material on education in an appealing and mature fashion. It assumes that the reader has identifiable points of reference against which to measure stories.

In an inconspicuous manner, however, the paper also offers a unique contextual setting. Example: an irregular series of eight long stories by Sara Rimer in the spring of the 1989-90 school year that etched a stark but sympathetic microcosm of urban school life. Centering on one

school, P.S. 94, Rimer's stories brought to center stage such seemingly mundane topics as the daily grind of a truant officer, the underappreciated work of teacher aides, and the hassles of a school security guard.

The *New York Times* is not the people's newspaper nor does it claim to be. Its staunchly establishmentarian editorial stands are not always easily digestible. Even its most devout fans cringe when the weekly travel section hails a "moderately priced" $60 lunch for two or the arts and entertainment pages tout arcane plays and concerts that are prohibitively expensive to attend.

The real distinction of the *New York Times*, the quality that so powerfully enhances the influence of its reporting on almost any subject, is its reputation as the nation's most authoritative newspaper. Stories that first appear in its pages are routinely picked up by other New York and major metropolitan newspapers, find their way into local and national radio and television newscasts, and frequently provide jump starts for features in the newsweeklies and the principal journals of opinion.

There is no valid basis for comparing the schools of New York City with those of Presque Isle, Maine, or Lufkin, Texas. There is validity, though, in the premise that a collapse in New York—or Chicago or Los Angeles—would trigger dreadful aftershocks throughout all strata of American education. In honoring its part of an unwritten compact to report fully and objectively on the city's and the nation's educational dilemmas, the *New York Times* performs a crucially important service for everyone—its readers, political policy-makers, and the education profession.

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CHAPTER 4

NAMES MAKE NEWS

ON AN EVENING MIDWAY THROUGH THE 1989–1990 TV SEASON, DAN Rather led off the CBS nightly newscast with an account of the sentencing of Leona Helmsley, a flamboyant New York City hotel operator found guilty of evading income taxes and using corporate resources for personal purposes. By any reasonable journalistic criteria the key story that day, as throughout those history-making fall and winter months, was not a scandal involving a crooked egomaniac. It was the historic revolution then sweeping furiously across Eastern Europe—a landmark event rivaled in this century only by two or three others.

In a rational world, Helmsley's excesses should not have made that day's national news, even as a filler item. Indeed, CBS should probably have abandoned its commercials and nearly all other news stories in favor of uninterrupted, around-the-clock coverage of the collapse of communism. Instead, we got a stiff dose of Mrs. Helmsley's travails. On a different day, it could as easily have been Donald Trump's split with Ivana or Zsa Zsa Gabor's confrontation with a judge in a Los Angeles courtroom. Lacking edge and bite as it does, how can education's story ever get across in this kind of media market?

If news is primarily about people and less than ten percent about abstractions, objects, or animals,[1] then the case for infusing more life and color into educational journalism is a foreordained loser. " 'Names make news,' " says political columnist David Broder, "is almost the first commandment of journalism."[2] In a culture obsessed with personalities, events, and topicality, people are the dependable focus of both broadcast and print media, which revel in chronicling success or failure and the changeable whims of the rich and famous. Celebrities have become our common frame of reference. The mass media have tilted inexorably

toward a "who's in-who's out?" kind of star system. Even if public audiences had fastened onto the Eastern Europe story, our attention span would have been too short. The names and places lacked connection to our lives. Many of them were unpronounceable. And they had little staying power.

When education's big-name players manage to command ink or screen time they do not materialize as newsmaking symbols of their profession. They come across instead as publicists or managers reacting to social or institutional happenings or trends in which they have had little complicity or influence. They are not really involved in the dilemmas of rising and falling test scores or dropout rates. They only write and talk about them. And if they were to prescribe feasible remedies, they would be poorly positioned to see them through.

The ubiquitous middle-aged white males who seem to do 95 percent of the public analyzing of education's malaises generally make good sense. Certified reformers all, they are nevertheless using, or being used by, the news media to comment on ideas that would have been anathema to many of them a few years earlier. Some of the key figures in the school reform game are only now coming up with ideas they simply hadn't thought of in their previous 15–30 years of writing, lecturing, and conferencing on educational policy matters. Their credibility is suspect. Their time may have passed.

The media have given us a frontpage and backstage look at most of our central social issues. It is at least arguable that the civic and social gains of the post-World War II era would have happened differently or gone unnoticed had television and newspapers not shared so much information so effectively. But coverage of our national learning endeavor—our system of education, the schools, the children—lagged behind the others. Equality for minority group members, women, the aged, and the disabled, the consumer movement, aid to the cities, economic opportunity, the antiwar movement, the environment—all were part of an unfolding national agenda that the media put on protracted, if not always sympathetic, display.

But the same media devoted little time or space to organized labor, to religious and church affairs, or to the underrated activities of fraternal, ethnic, patriotic, and veterans' organizations—"blue collar" matters of only limited concern to the upscale audiences whose resources and tastes as consumers of ideas (as well as of automobiles, computers, and financial services, among others) importantly sway the media's preferences for coverage.[3]

Though concern about education should cut across all lines of class and economic status, the media's overall performance in this respect was uneven and indifferent until the mid-1980s. Only sporadically during the previous 50 years did they cough up anything more challenging than *pro forma* reportage of financial issues, achievement awards, school board meetings, and press releases that, in many parts of the country, remain today the centerpieces of education-oriented journalism. Analysis was rare; unexamined facts, or the official version of them, overwhelmingly dominated education reporting.

Journalism by press handout may alienate readers and viewers, but it remains a favored practice in education and in most other public sectors, where news gathering "is normally a matter of the representatives of one bureaucracy picking up prefabricated news from representatives of another bureaucracy . . ."[4] Moreover, says Michael Schudson, " . . . the journalist's quest for the predictable meets comfortably with the bureaucrat's quest for printer's ink . . . . the Ptolemaic influence on American journalism, this attention to cycles of activity, monthly reports, quarterly reports that revise the monthlies, annual reports that reconfigure the quarterlies."[5] In an earlier time, Mark Twain called this kind of reporting "chloroform in print."

The inadequacies of this time-honored technique—and its lack of audience appeal in the video age—dawned anew on most quarters of the profession less than a generation ago when Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* combined investigative zeal and relentless probing to score one of journalism's historic coups, the two-year Watergate story. Bypassing the 1972–74 White House's evasive official version of events, the young reporters made household names of a holding pen-full of political operators—Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, Colson, Dean, Magruder, Sloan, *et al.*—and mincemeat of the reputation of a twice-elected President. Our long-time preoccupation with personalities, which was soon to reach an apogee with the appearance of *People*, *US*, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Interview*, *USA Today*, and the supermarket tabloids was well-served by Watergate. The story was a three-star journalistic triumph: scandal in the corridors of power, gossip by the carload, and the heady thrill of bringing the rascals down. And it was a multi-media coup, as it spawned a profusion of television docudramas and news programs, radio specials, magazine features, books, and an award-winning film, *All the President's Men*, which is widely credited with persuading thousands of young people to choose journalism as a career.

For the most part, today's journalists are not reputation-destroying carnivores. But they are quick to spot salable or unique qualities in emerging public figures. Feistiness, physical attractiveness, high promise, the scent of scandal—all of these draw the mass media, especially young reporters impressed by national icons, like flies to a summer picnic. Colorful personalities are everywhere throughout American life. Business can produce good guys of the Lee Iacocca or H. Ross Perot variety, scoundrels like Ivan Boesky and Leona Helmsley, or the colorful likes of Donald Trump or T. Boone Pickens. Similarly, science, the media, and even the consumer movement with media-wise Ralph Nader as its 30-year symbol of virtue and sacrifice, repeatedly capture attention in large degree through the magnetism of their achievers and quotemeisters.

Purists decry this distortion of priorities. Content, of course, must take priority over image. They are unarguably correct. They are also, deliberately or not, remiss or uninformed in the ways of modern communication. The messenger IS important, nowhere as strikingly as on television, the latter-day opiate of the masses. While it is unwise for education or any endeavor to surrender unthinkingly to the folk customs of the mass media, educational leaders who neglect to heed them do so at their peril and possibly at some cost to the schools. As technology infiltrates the school building and the media acquire the added breadth and competence that inevitably accompany it, visual images are destined to loom ever larger in our lives. We may deplore the emergence of even more form at the expense of substance, but education's larger messages must still compete in a market that may open dramatically in the 1990s. The profession cannot write its own rules for informing its larger constituency. The obstacles are far too large, and the biggest of all, our national mania for human images on small screens, is presently insurmountable.

The media have been telling us awful things about the schools. Yet they have so far not blamed individual school leaders, preferring to concentrate their fire on such fish in a barrel as bloated school bureaucracies (a questionable description that educators could refute with a bit of effort), inadequately prepared teachers, and, more recently, the way schooling is structured and the changing patterns of family life. In large cities, where schools fall far short of conventional expectations, the systems' top functionaries usually escape *ad hominem* criticism. When a city declines to renew the contract of a failed superintendent (very few are actually fired), local media do not usually chase the ousted official to the city line. Often, in fact, a new and better job may await the deposed administrator in the next town.

It is clearly within the power of the local papers and broadcast outlets to mobilize opinion against those who serve the community's children badly. Whether out of kindness (unlikely), civic responsibility, or a genuine sensitivity to what really happens in education's executive suites, most papers and TV stations have ignored the temptation to pile it on. On the national scene, too, education's main players, who form a civilized entourage of largely unknown authors and commentators, are seldom taken to task for their inconsistencies and the flat-out bad advice they have dispensed along with the good. Within recent memory, only one national educational leader, former U.S. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, has been the target of heavy critical fire. His predecessor, the remarkable William Bennett, alienated the educational community but he became a nationally admired headliner in the process.

Education's cause does not lack star-quality boosters. The well-touted "Education Summit" of September 1989 drew the nation's high-visibility political leaders, including the "Education President." Well-known entertainers, athletes, and corporate leaders have always been ready to cut a video tape, record a public service announcement, or sign an appeal. What they haven't usually offered is sustained commitment. When the environmental movement staged the 1990 version of Earth Day, Washington overflowed with public figures on hand for the occasion. Included in their number were superstars of entertainment and the arts who had devoted serious time, energy, and resources to promoting the main issues. At the least, this heavily covered media event contributed to the consolidation and momentum that a widely dispersed national effort demands. It has not harmed the case for defending the environment that such motion picture and television megastars as Meryl Streep, Ted Danson, and Robert Redford have demonstrated more than passing familiarity with the central themes of the movement.

Perhaps the Bush Administration's second Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, will attract this kind of support to his "crusade" to change the schools. But Alexander's image is that of a folksy border state politician, a sincere but unglamorous personality who reminded columnist James J. Kilpatrick of a college tennis coach. And his chief aides do not combine charisma with their indisputable competence.

In the first year of the George Bush presidency, according to the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs, evening newscasts of the Big Three commercial TV networks mentioned the Bush family's English springer spaniel dog Millie more often than they did then-Secretary Cavazos. Plausible interpretations of the Cavazos

shortfall are easily found. For starters, the Secretary possessed the gift of obscurity and self-effacement, a devastating combination of qualities in a cabinet officer with a staff exceeding 4,500, responsibility for $25 billion of federal monies, and a battalion of public and Congressional relations professionals capable of conveying his words and thoughts into nearly every media outlet in the nation. Too, education has never had much appeal as a Washington-type political story. It has not been a gripping subject for the Washington journalistic colony of political junkies juggling what they considered to be far weightier and more urgent matters meriting their attention. More likely, the Administration (and the Secretary himself) may have nursed unexpressed doubts that an unknown physiologist who had come to the cabinet from an unprestigious college presidency would have much of an audience for his views on children and schools.

Persuasive though these arguments may have been for Dr. Cavazos, neither they nor any other barriers had deterred his predecessor from transforming an unloved bureaucratic backwater, the nonachieving U.S. Department of Education, into a podium from which to expound on the ills of America's schools and universities. William Bennett pursued this mission with such zeal and conviction that he entered the 1990s on the short list for a place on a national Republican ticket later in the decade.

In his three years in office, Bennett, a philosophy professor turned bureaucrat, seldom advanced a new idea. Indeed, his hundreds of voluminously covered speeches, interviews, and writings revealed a mind wedded to the educational theories and practices of a bygone era. But he is a persuasive and imposing presence, an opinionated but magnetic media performer who generated high popularity ratings despite (or conceivably because of) an unoriginal educational agenda. Disdaining, even mocking, professional educators, Bennett nearly single-handedly steered national discussion onto conservative turf, where it has stayed even though such nonpartisan issues as school restructuring, parental roles, and technology returned to the national discussion in 1989 and 1990.

American education is far too large, widely dispersed, and varied to tolerate having its affairs interpreted through the media by a small band of white middle-aged males with axes to grind but little responsibility for affecting what happens in the schools. Yet that is exactly what has been happening since the schools hit the front pages and TV screens in 1983 after a decade-long hiatus. Education's constituency may be nonsexist and largely colorblind, but the people who appear regularly as its

most publicized advocates are drawn from the same pool. With few exceptions, they are true publicists, experts on public affairs, with immense knowledge but marginal potential for practicing what they preach. Important exceptions: Theodore Sizer with his Coalition of Essential Schools and John Goodlad, who unveiled his "practice" schools in late 1990. Neither is known outside of the education profession. Finding more than a few women or minority group representatives in these ranks would tax the skills of the most intrepid private eye.

Public education teems with people of every conceivable description. Broder asserts that most journalists " . . . are a lot more comfortable thinking about individuals than about institutions."[6] The potential for these two truisms to converge to the benefit of the schools should be obvious. Instead, the merger rarely happens. No respectable education reporter expects to stumble on bizarre stories of the calibre of "Psychiatrist Commits Mayhem" or "Guest Drowns at Party for 100 Lifeguards." Nor is there a surfeit of yodeling school principals. Education's people become news when a new report comes out, or test scores drop, or bond proposals are defeated, and they provide a few quotable sentences or a carefully manufactured sound bite. They react; they don't create news.

More than the print media, broadcasting seems to need celebrities to symbolize ideas and programs. This implicit obligation may offend defenders of education's faith, but it is close to an inescapable reality. It is so widely accepted by the television industry that it creates its own links between public figures and worthy causes whenever it needs them. Thus, Senator Edward Kennedy embodies liberalism and Jesse Helms the radical right, while Gloria Steinem (for) and Phyllis Schlafly (against) symbolize the debate on women's rights. It is no accident that, like Ted Turner (broadcasting), Ralph Nader (consumerism), and Colin Powell (defense), to take three of many conspicuous examples, these are self-confident, dynamic, and many-faceted individuals. The possibility that some may not actually be the top figures in their line of work is of tangential concern. They are its best-known representatives, anointed by the national media and accepted by the reading and viewing public.

There is a profound dearth of telegenic Steinems and Powells in education. Our national conversation about children and learning has little vigor; it is, in fact, nearly lifeless. When the CBS television network, traditionally the least enterprising of the networks in covering education, got around to airing a two-hour documentary on effective schools during back-to-school week in September 1990, it turned to Dr. Ernest Boyer as chief consultant and on-screen sage. Articulate and poised as always,

Boyer showed as an avuncular school person who talked sense and looked reasonably comfortable sharing a set with a blackboard, a yellow school bus, and the commanding figure of host Charles Kuralt. It would be hard to fault his wise and stabilizing presence. But some of the main ingredients of what is supposed to constitute audience-attracting documentary television were absent. Dr. Boyer's measured observations lacked any semblance of originality. ("In the end, education is reduced to a teacher in a classroom who can inspire children.") Other leaders who appeared on the show offered equally bland comments (Sizer: "Getting to know the kids well is more important than providing them with this great cornucopia of courses;" Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund: "We must be sure when [children] walk through the schoolhouse door, they are ready to learn, and they feel good about themselves;" and Keith Geiger of the National Education Association: "In just about every school district in the United States, we have teachers who are doing an excellent job in a specific area . . . and what we need to do is to tap those people to be working with the other teachers.")

Altogether, a praiseworthy programming effort that took millions of viewers inside an assortment of schools on the move proved to be a flavorless stew, a well-meant offering that cried out for the spark and spice that the education establishment's old guard appears unable or, more likely, unwilling to generate. The problem pervades the awkward coupling of schools and the media. In the competitive world of the news media, education's spokespersons come across as caring, informed, and articulate—but as stimulating as a drizzly autumn day in a Slobbovian village.

CHAPTER 5

THE NATIONAL STORYTELLER

WHATEVER WE MAY CALL IT, THE BEHEMOTH KNOWN AS TELEVISION—a hybrid word that is half-Greek, half-Latin, and barely a half-century old—has implanted itself in our lives. With receiving boxes in nearly every household in the nation, almost 70 percent of them with two or more of the contraptions, and 60 percent of all those sets linked through cable systems to 20–60 separate channels, television has become the people's habit. Two-thirds of the American public turn to it as the source of most of its news, while more than half rate it as the most believable source. If TV does not fully engage our waking hours, it surely places a strong second to working. Even with its wild diversity, and in the face of ceaseless criticism, it may come as lose to a state religion or national curriculum as America is likely to get. Moreover, as media guru Marshall McLuhan observed in the 1960s, "TV is addictive. It's a drug." It has become our common cultural ground.

Unsurprisingly, most of this portrayal needs only slight tailoring to fit public education, another frequently maligned colossus that is also familiar, mostly credible, and widely, even addictively, used.

Why, then, don't these primal forces speak the same language more often than they do? Both want desperately to be seen and heard, and their main qualities as supplier and user are naturally complementary. It is hardly a secret that the schools crave the recognition and legitimacy that television semi-automatically confers on its subjects. And the medium's insatiable appetite for viewable material to fill its endless program hours should play straight into the hands of the schools. But it usually doesn't work that way. Though the indifference that once characterized TV-school ties evolved cautiously into an unacknowledged alliance of sorts in the late 1980s, and TV is a prime, if usually unwitting,

educator in its own right, the connection remains shaky. The couple has taken a few awkward turns around the floor, but the beat isn't quite right yet. Now in its fifth decade as a pervasive presence in the nation's living rooms, TV has brought us visions of moon walks, battlefield action, and killer hurricanes. Yet the real drama of the learning experience somehow continues to elude it.

The menu of TV programming choices keeps expanding: local and national for-profit outlets, public broadcasting, cable with its citizen access and educational channels, videocassettes, and a gamut of new forms including interactive video disks and various multimedia combinations involving computers, telephones, and stereo that will kick in during the 1990s. Early in the decade, though, the established networks still cling shakily to the high ground. It is principally to their performance, as well as to that of the major established cable networks, that we must look if television is to enlighten the nation about its schools.

In a fantasy for the times, Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, to be met by TV's most famous reporters. They interview him, and their stories are edited. Only two Commandments make it to the evening news—the ones on adultery and coveting one's neighbor's wife.

The trials and triumphs of our schools are somewhat less than dominant themes in national TV's coverage of news and public affairs. The pro-education consumer of the three main commercial networks' output is forced to acknowledge that the narrow TV niche of the schools in the reform-attuned 1980s had widened but slightly as the 1990s began. The momentum that the publication of *A Nation at Risk* unleashed in 1983 displayed little staying power as a TV staple. Though the medium's news and entertainment potentates have generally come to recognize, even to share, the public's heightened concern over school performance, they have done little to translate this realization into more staff, resources, and air time. Of 3,500-odd network employees (roughly 1,200 per major system), a total that includes hordes of specialists in fields ranging from sports to foreign affairs, fewer than a dozen work on education on a full-time or continuing basis. And in the recession-driven cutbacks of the early 1990s, those figures were headed downward.

In covering education, the networks have been guided in large measure by the stories that the news wire services and a few other print sources such as the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, the newsweeklies, *Education Week*, *Education USA*, and sometimes *USA Today*, consider newsworthy. Only irregularly do they monitor educa-

tion trends or budding stories themselves. Their larger mission often seems to be to define American education as "youth at risk." Once pointed in that direction, the networks will head straight for the sensational, the pictorially vivid, and the aberrational. Four decades of firing line experience have taught them that audiences are not transfixed by press conferences, even if they promise startling new directions, or by the careerists who run and speak for most of American public education.

Acutely aware that their share of the television audience is gradually diminishing as cable and videocassette recorders claim more viewers—Turner Broadcasting's *Cable News Network* and its separate *Headline News* channel, both of them 24-hour operations, redefined TV news delivery during the Persian Gulf War—the networks are seeking ways to regain their once undisputed dominance—or at least to keep from slipping as swiftly as they did in the early 1990s. The schools may beckon, but they are what the industry calls "a tough sell." While the potential for television to become the nation's "Great Educator" seems to expand exponentially and is often brilliantly realized, messages about the schools themselves still come across to TV audiences as colorless and forgettable.

Part of the blame attaches to the schools, which perceive little need to enliven or package attractively what their leaders often seem to consider a messianic message. But equal guilt falls to the medium, which thrives on eye-catching happenings or backdrops and prefers to convey their flavor through attention-riveting effects—quick cuts, tricky camera angles, flashing lights, garish colors, and pounding music. The kinds of education-connected stories that shock, excite and inform in a publicity-grabbing fashion have little to do with learning; they are on such themes as sports events (and cheerleaders), drug busts, pregnant students, or violence in the schools. Children acquiring computer skills or winning awards for poetry are not among the medium's favorite topics.

The sad tale of "Learning in America" illustrates the point. Viewed by its originators and the Chrysler Corporation, which underwrote it, as a hard-hitting benchmark series on the nation's schools, the ambitious, well-advertised "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" presentation ran in five largely unwatched hour-long segments over 200-odd Public Broadcasting Service stations in 1989. The material in most of its thoroughly researched segments covered territory that was already familiar to the typical newspaper-reading viewers who comprise most PBS audiences.

As a breakthrough in educating public opinion on the schools' problems, "Learning in America" fell short. Perversely, its objectivity

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and dogged thoroughness may have limited its mass appeal. According to Joe Quinlan, the Emmy Award-winner who produced it, the series' ratings were average for a PBS prime time offering. In other words, fewer than three percent of the nation's television viewers on those evenings saw it during its highly favorable time slots. In shunning sensationalism to focus instead on education's gut issues, "Learning in America" did what PBS and MacNeil/Lehrer do best: try to tell the real story honestly whether it is riveting TV or not. No such qualms inhibited the producers of a "48 Hours" special on high schools which dwelled lengthily on the problems of homeless students, an arresting concern but not a frontline crisis in most of the nation's 20,500 secondary schools.

In an era of what the media critic Edwin Diamond calls "disco news," depictions of the tortoise-like pace of educational change have mixed appeal for viewers, sponsors, and television news organizations. A medium that features profiles, exposés, and confrontation—"Crossfire," Turner Broadcasting's nightly half-hour program on CNN, which tackles education only when it is the day's lead story, is a classic example of the type—does not easily adjust to stories that lack bite or sharp edges. A central characteristic of TV, writes Hedrick Smith in *The Power Game*, is to feed "the public appetite to treat events as binary—good or bad, up or down, progress or setback, winners or losers—and to push aside more complex layers of reality."[1] Unfortunately, this simplified description hits the mark. Education's mandarins must somehow deal with it as pretty close to unchangeable reality. When they don't, an unfair burden of enlivening the routine is loaded on normally well-disposed TV producers, writers, and commentators.

This is manifestly not education's customary terrain. Most of the debate in public education still occurs within the field's extended family. Outsiders who become privy to it often struggle through attacks of acute ennui. Literally dozens of education-associated themes need to be understood beyond the profession, but they almost all lack the conventional ingredients of TV appeal. With education's far right currently communicating largely with itself over local TV outlets and with the fragile progressive school movement at the other end of the ideological spectrum lacking cohesion and nationally known advocates, the arena for discussion is thus left to the usual suspects: the loose assemblage of educational centrists, traditionalists, and conservative "reformers" whose natural home bases may be the speakers' podium or panelists' tables at national education conferences.

Education's case to become a TV news and feature staple may be further impaired by the medium's own cocky assessment of itself as omniscient educator. Communications expert Neil Postman produces persuasive evidence that "television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to [and] less likely than print to cultivate higher-order thinking."[2] In the 1990s, however, his analysis of the pitfalls of depending on TV as a primary learning source may have less validity as CNN, C-SPAN, and such learning-centered services as The Discovery Channel, Arts and Entertainment Network, The Learning Channel, Mind Enhancement University, and a host of community, college, and school stations can—and most vociferously do—boast of their rapidly expanding assortment of attractively packaged educational offerings.

Even the most daringly experimental among these cable operators have already accepted the need to live with the obvious: that certain TV production values and practices are universal. Some, such as the unstated requirement that the talking heads be physically attractive, likeable, youthful-appearing, direct in manner, and attired for all outdoor footage in trenchcoats with epaulets, seem downright silly. Unless they pay close heed to these folkways, though, the schools may find themselves on the outside looking enviously in.

Lacking sophisticated commentators and in-house expertness on the schools, the commercial networks and CNN frequently report on educational issues as though they had discovered them just in time for the 6:30 *Eyewitness* news show. Sportscasters routinely describe squeeze plays and business reporters discourse confidently on the ticks of the Dow-Jones index in the certain knowledge that viewers know what they are talking about, but such routine educational terms as choice, alternative certification, and site-based management seem to require simplistic and repetitive explanation.

The only conspicuous exception to this "square one" mentality at the national level is John Merrow, whose thoughtful reports on *The Learning Channel* both enlighten and respect the viewer. But TLC's audience is still minuscule, even by cable TV's standards, so Merrow's penetrating and provocative segments draw a far smaller following than they merit. In the land of the TV superpowers, reportage on the schools often seems to follow the adage that "to ignore recent history is to do the right thing." In their rare forays into school territory, such famous TV personalities as Barbara Walters, Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather attempt to impart urgency and freshness to some of education's most familiar old chestnuts. Seldom, however, do they question the venerable

parochialisms about learning that still guide most public discussion of the schools.

This misinterpretation of fundamental educational values may persist in the early 1990s as the high-powered business-oriented tandem of Lamar Alexander and David Kearns settles into the top two positions at the U.S. Department of Education. Television is kind to both of these articulate spokespersons, and their records—Alexander's as a pro-education governor and Kearns's as the chief executive officer of Xerox—assure sympathetic access to the TV screen.

The networks and CNN are by no means ill-disposed toward the schools, and they profess reverence for their responsibility as a source of public learning. By and large, they adapt and report accurately, if much too briefly, what print journalism feeds them. At times, as in the year preceding the 1988 Presidential election and in the days surrounding the Charlottesville "Education Summit," the "Big Three" have exhibited some resourcefulness in trying to make a creditable yet appealing story out of what happens in the schools. After the election, ABC added an on-air education correspondent, and the three early morning shows—NBC's "Today," ABC's "Good Morning, America," and the "CBS Morning Show"—have routinely included educational issues in their schedules. Although they have far fewer viewers than the evening newscasts or prime-time entertainment programs, their material is presented in a somewhat more leisurely, sometimes even thoughtful style, not in the carefully calibrated, eye-catching bites of the evening newscasts.

Again, ABC usually leads the pack, with News President Roone Arledge and evening anchorman Peter Jennings reportedly carrying strong personal commitments to covering education. Typifying ABC's superiority was a report by education correspondent (and former teacher) Bill Blakemore on the "World News Tonight" newscast of December 4, 1990 on progress toward meeting President Bush's goals for education by the year 2000. In a brief but pointed segment, Blakemore concluded that "there is hardly a problem in American education which has not been solved somewhere . . . . The excuses are disappearing for any leaders who say we don't yet have the knowledge states need to adopt for their own restructuring." This was direct and embarrassingly accurate reporting. Its conclusions remain unchallenged.

The TV news magazines and documentaries that the networks publicly prize as their unique contributions to illuminating major events and trends have historically short-changed the schools. But the networks like to catch (or create) waves, and news programs in general

have vaulted over series and general drama to occupy second place to situation comedies as money-makers. These series, including such entries as ABC's "PrimeTime Live" and "48 Hours," along with the more solidly established "60 Minutes" and "Nightline," can be surprisingly strong breadwinners for the networks. Even though all but the perennially high-rating "60 Minutes" score relatively poorly in the ratings sweepstakes, they are considerably less expensive than entertainment programming, and their return on the dollar is excellent. Their prognosis, according to network executives, is good and improving.

Education has nevertheless remained a second-line player in this game, although Brent Baker of the conservative Alexandria, Virginia-based Media Research Center asserts that it is already faring better than it deserves. Along with the networks' greater readiness to grant the schools heavier coverage, he asserts, has come a gullible acceptance of "the NEA point of view and the notion that dollars are the answer to education's problems."

This elevated consciousness may augur well at a time when the number of parents with children in the schools, the natural support base for public education, is diminishing. Disappointingly, though, the topics that attract the heaviest mention in the networks' most watched news shows are scarcely ever those that stimulate solid public backing for the public schools. A compilation by the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs for the 30-month period from February 1987 through July 1989 revealed that the three networks ran a total of 350 stories on education-related matters, or .009 percent of the 36,000 pieces on all subjects that aired during that time. Of the 350, approximately 150 had little to do with the schools (items, for example, on Oliver North as a commencement speaker and national service as an emerging issue), while many of the remaining 200-odd fastened on such continuing but essentially peripheral stories as student demonstrations at Gallaudet College, the wit and wisdom of William Bennett, and the plight of a child with AIDS.[3]

All had news value and impact; few had much to do with whether or how children are learning in our schools. Except for some items on ABC, even fewer carried positive messages. Predictably, but unnecessarily, the take dwindled almost to the vanishing point between mid-June and late August of 1987 and 1988 and was only slightly higher in the summer of 1989. Perhaps education's media-watchers can draw consolation from the data from a decade earlier; in all of 1977, 1978, and 1979,

the early evening news shows combined devoted less than four hours to education.[4]

Progress of a sort was registered in 1990, when education scored 13th out of 18 key topics that Tyndall Research tracked for the year. It received a total of 368 minutes of coverage on the network newscasts, which worked out to an average of slightly over 10 minutes per newscast per month or roughly 2.2 percent of all news time, a level comparable to those of transportation and accidents (2.5 percent), sports (2.5 percent), natural disasters (2.3), and issues of race and immigration. Though still low, the numbers for education reflected significant increases over the totals for 1989 (up 23 percent) and 1988 (an 87 percent increase.)[5]

The professed readiness of the networks to give education a better break raises the questions of how balanced or objective TV news coverage must be and of what kinds of newsworthy stories are being underreported. Given the limited available air time that television offers, the two questions are intimately linked. If the material available in network newsrooms consistently tracks scandal and sensationalism, the temptation for TV to transform such leads into visually compelling, take-no-prisoners coverage at the expense of more analytical treatment of educational issues can be overpowering. The likelihood increases in the case of an obsessively profit-driven medium that thrives on intramural competition for high ratings and has never objected too energetically to exposing the underside of the human services.

To their credit, the "Big Three" networks often strive to balance negative reports, but at only 2.2 percent of all reporting, education's abbreviated bites (which are somewhat longer on the "American Agenda" items on the ABC evening news show) tilt to the lurid, the scandalous, and the negative.

Given this preference, the question remains: Are the networks obliged to give the schools' side of all issues as most local stations usually try to do? If they did so, would they not be expected to bestow something approaching equal time for expanded public housing, free or low-cost day care, less expensive medical services, and dozens of other seemingly essential public services, all of which can probably match education's claim to public support? Clearly, this is not TV's mission, and little likelihood exists that the medium is about to become an uncritical house organ for education or any other cause or institutional force, whatever its merit.

The prospect that education topics will achieve and retain the national spotlight is ensnarled in a dense tangle of conflicting industry trends, contemporary cultural myths, and the belief systems of the

commercial networks. In television, as in other forms of popular culture, this morning's hot item is tonight's has-been. Even though responsible producers and broadcasters may have come to judge education as ready for continuing national coverage, their chiefs in the corner offices see far more lucrative bottom lines emerging from areas and presentational forms that are far removed (and deservedly so) from schools and children.

The hour-long specials that currently dot the prime time log appear to be seeking new frontiers in pandering to our national taste for the trivial and lurid. "The journalists," says Peter J. Boyer, "are becoming entertainers."[6] With ownership of the major networks now in the hands of huge conglomerates that clearly view news as a business like any other (their predecessors were no angels, but most were old radio people with a soft spot for their news divisions), it was inevitable that two things would—and did—happen: massive cuts in staff and resources, and a readiness to produce almost anything that could yield maximum profits while remaining technically classifiable as news. Thus such "specials" as NBC's "Bad Girls," "Scared Sexless," and "Life in the Fast Lane," and the dramatizations of actual news events that the networks' cameras had failed to catch live. Anyone with a surefire script for a show to be called "School Finance Reform in Montana and North Dakota" should not be devastated if the networks aren't enthralled.

The assumptions guiding television news, says award-winning public TV newscaster Robert MacNeil, are " . . . that complexity must be avoided, that nuances are dispensable, that qualifications impede the simple message, that visual stimulation is a substitute for thought, and that verbal precision is an anachronism."[7] Unhappily, these and other even more dismal strictures describe much of what passes for school-focussed TV dramatic entertainment. Never a popular source of inspiration for the backers and producers of top-rated situation comedies and weightier dramatic fare, education has routinely fizzled in the ratings battles that ultimately dictate what most TV households are destined to watch after dinner.

In their ceaseless intrusion into our homes and lives, the commercial networks have tried repeatedly to sell education as pop drama to prime-time customers. Even though learning purportedly increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, the combination of life in the schools and the persona of TV drama has rarely clicked. In a trendy, volatile industry that constantly lusts after salable formulas, no school-centered series rates in the top 100 of television's "all time"

champions (compiled from 39 years of ratings), and only three—"Our Miss Brooks" at number 22 in the 1952–53 season and 14 a year later; "Welcome Back, Kotter," 18th in 1975–76 and 13th in 1976–77; and "Head of the Class" at 25 in 1987–88, all of them comedies—have ever cracked the annual top 25 as reported in the authoritative A.C. Nielsen ratings.[8] To recall some of the witless drivel that has steadily outranked these frivolous, unrepresentative depictions of the school experience might cause otherwise composed educators to sob uncontrollably.

As the Gallup polls and plain common sense have shown, most Americans do not buy the caricature of public education that commercial TV drama has tried to flash into our living rooms. We do nevertheless witness nightly portrayals of how society is structured in videoland and how its goods and power are distributed. We also receive unmistakable messages about how social behavior is motivated. Thus, the viewer of many, if not most, prime-time series could be forgiven for nursing a peculiar vision of the kinds of persons who control our children's working hours. If television's situation comedies are to be believed, our teachers since the 1950s have been manipulative, man-crazy zanies ("Our Miss Brooks"), amiable nerds ("Mr. Peepers"), earnest do-gooders ("Mr. Novak"), permissive stand-up comedians ("Kotter"), charismatic former major league athletes ("The White Shadow" and "Lucas Tanner") or bemused custodians of Diogenes' lamp ("Head of the Class"). Most are omniscient males who do not teach in elementary schools, which are largely absent from the screen. They continue to do things their way whatever the pathetic functionaries masquerading as principals may think or dictate.

Occasional exceptions pop up. "Fame" enjoyed some success with its upbeat version of life in a school for artistically talented high schoolers, and the award-winning "Room 222," which lasted four years a generation ago, featured a respected history teacher coping intelligently with the vicissitudes of life in an inner city high school. "Mr. Novak," the portrayal of an idealistic young teacher in the early 1960s, was a daring venture for its time in confronting racial issues, sex education, anti-Semitism, and the rights of the disabled. The appearance of these formula-breaking rarities is decennial, not annual or seasonal, and certain precast images and stereotypes persist.

From "Our Miss Brooks," which many educators half-seriously contend set the teaching profession back 100 years,[9] to "Homeroom," ABC's bland and foredoomed entry for the 1989–90 season (it sank quickly to the lower depths of the Nielsen ratings after one showing and, as *USA Today* put it, was "unseen" thereafter) and the unfortunate

"Hull High," which appeared briefly early in the 1990–1991 season, TV drama's track record in capturing the soul and culture of our schools has thus been undistinguished. Unlike the lawyers of "L.A. Law," the surgeons of "M*A*S*H*," or the police officers in any crime series, the people who work in the schools do not spend much time at their real jobs. Teachers and administrators live in a state of ceaseless conflict, with the students rooting uncritically for their pal, the teacher. Most damning, the entire K-12 enterprise, especially the secondary schools, comes through as less professional and less attractive than comparable endeavors. Nowhere in TV drama's portrayal of the schools is there a hint that public education has come under heavy critical fire and that it could use a bit of advocacy rather than benign toleration. Instead, we witness an unending parade of teen-agers coping with being rich ("Beverly Hills 90210") or naughty ("Ferris Bueller" and "Parker Lewis Can't Lose").

Yet the coin has another side. Distorted though television drama's version of the culture of the schools may appear, its overall impact is by no means lopsidedly negative. While the acts of teaching and learning get short shrift, social issues beyond the schoolyard fence that beset all of our human services—and the children and families they serve—often receive featured billing in illuminating and sympathetic fashion. Sometimes, the schools are shown as part of the solution, not of the problem. Not all students are like Mr. Kotter's "sweathogs." In the main, they want to succeed eventually—even, as in "Fame," to excel—and they will somehow manage to do what is necessary. Increasingly, too, administrators, teachers and students are depicted in full demographic bloom. The ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the American scene is at least adequately pictured in a relaxed and reinforcing style.

In the more credible series, the development of characters and situations is often cumulative rather than episodic. Two of the more responsible entries, "Life Goes On" and "The Wonder Years," have used welcoming school environments in communicating the natural flow of family life. "DeGrassi High," the weekly PBS drama, which has run occasionally but tellingly since the late 1980s, explores a range of social issues—teen suicide, AIDS, bulimia, abortion, interracial romance, substance abuse—while building a picture of how a cross-section of contemporary teen-agers conduct their lives. When this happens, education becomes humanized, and its business is communicated as an evolving, profoundly important side of our daily existence.

Regrettably, TV's view of our main social institutions lacks consistency. While it was caricaturing teachers and schools in the 1950s and

1960s, the medium was shamelessly glorifying doctors and hospitals, with the American Medical Association's Hollywood office providing "technical guidance," in such uncritical offerings as "Medic," "Dr. Kildare," and "Ben Casey." Later as education failed to gain a toehold in TV drama, the roster of medical shows expanded to embrace the saintly "Marcus Welby, M.D." as well as different kinds of practitioners, soap operas, and, in such series as "St. Elsewhere," "China Beach," and "Island Son," thorny, often unconventional ethical questions. The three commercial networks have also long featured advice-dispensing doctors on their morning news programs, while *Lifetime*, one of the principal cable networks, transforms itself every Sunday into *Lifetime Medical Television* and targets all of its specialized output to doctors and other professional medical people—a device that organized education might explore.

PROFILE

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John Merrow: Role Model for Education Journalists

FIFTEEN YEARS OF COAST-TO-COAST BROADCASTING HAVE MADE JOHN Merrow's voice, face, and engaging style familiar to countless, possibly millions, of Americans who care about learning. On whatever medium—an eight-year run and 400 programs on National Public Radio, nearly five years and 100 appearances as the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour's education correspondent, or as producer/host of *The Learning Channel*'s (TLC) "Learning Matters" since January 1990—encounters with Merrow have left audiences informed and enlightened.

John Merrow never disappoints his viewers. But he can irritate, sometimes anger them. Part old-fashioned muckraker (now called investigative reporter) and part piranha, especially in confrontations with pretentious or underprepared guests, he can be a contentious interpreter of the learning scene. By a wide margin the most formidable and respected presence in broadcasting on education, Merrow digs far beneath conventional surfaces, often to reveal unexpected depths in an interviewee or a story, equally frequently to expose their shallowness. In the early 1990s, the weekly "Learning Matters" came the closest of any of his ventures to exploiting the ever-broadening repertoire of this talented reporter/broadcaster/educator.

Rarely have a subject and its communicator been so admirably matched. A first-rate writer with a born reporter's nose for a good story, Merrow is also a seasoned teacher with a Harvard doctorate in education and public policy. That he is blessed with telegenic good looks and an irreverent, self-deprecating sense of humor helps him to thrive in a medium that does not often find this combination.

Merrow is both risk-taker and entrepreneur. After ten years in the business, *The Learning Channel* remains largely unknown to American TV audiences. But NPR was just out of diapers when his "Options in

Education" broadcasts debuted in 1974, and the MacNeil/Lehrer show was widely unwatched in the mid-1980s when his work initially appeared there. The odds on TLC are good. It added 4.7 million subscribers to an 18-million base in the year beginning in April 1990, and what *Cable Television Magazine* called "its innovative alliances with civic and government groups," as well as its takeover in 1991 by *The Discovery Channel*, may help lift it to the 25-million-home level, or even higher, by 1993.

Despite his own formidable assets and nearly ideal settings for the in-depth reports he prefers, Merrow is less than enchanted by television's performance in covering education. Much of what we see, he asserts, consists of 90-150 second quickies in which something supposedly new is hurriedly shown, a few children smile shyly as their teacher explains it, and a trench-coated reporter intones, "It's too early to tell if this makes a difference. Back to you, Jeff and Debbie."

What has drawn John Merrow to public radio and now to *The Learning Channel* is surely not the massive audiences that the commercial entertainment networks still attract, even as they lose ground to cable and other competitors in the electronic bubble. The lure of a guaranteed viewership in the millions can be overpowering, but the prospect of feeding it a diet of snippets, bites, and short takes is underwhelming. Equally unpalatable to a dedicated journalist/educator is the certain knowledge that stories on education still rank low as candidates for inclusion in a daily 22-minute summary of fast-breaking news.

Whether on television or radio, Merrow revels in going after tough subjects: violence in the schools, how colleges really select applicants, children with AIDS, alcoholism among students, sexual molestation, why some teachers aren't up to the job. But he is equally attracted to spotlighting schools, teachers, and practices that work, often over the opposition or inertia of stand-pat bureaucracies. The overall effect of his work has been to help give both National Public Radio and the MacNeil/Lehrer show reputations as promoters of a fair shake for education in public broadcasting. It has been a two-way street. Merrow's long employment as national broadcasting's only full-time education reporter was undeniably a boon to his career, but, as he says, "it also gave education a boost in credibility and legitimacy as a subject for TV news." To their credit, MacNeil and Lehrer, as well as *The Learning Channel*'s Rob Shuman, have steadily encouraged him to regard a good story as "like an onion with layers that pull back as the story unfolds."

Doing business with John Merrow is no luncheon at the garden club. Left to his own devices, he will invariably push to the outer limit of

themes that the broadcast media can tolerate. Nor is he averse to launching assaults on vulnerable targets—notably school administrators (whom he uncharitably dubbed "the blob," complete with gory scenes from the film of the same name)—without giving them sufficient opportunities for rebuttal. But these are exceptions, on-air proof that John Merrow is first a journalist and then an educator, but never a hireling of the education establishment.

Merrow and Shuman view "Learning Matters" as "the electronic meeting place" of education. Early returns suggest that it is evolving into precisely that: a forum for a seemingly limitless span of facts and interpretations about children, learning, and schools, a screen on which to display education's strengths and shortfalls, and, in its live format, an accessible way for viewers throughout the nation to speak their piece. But as Merrow's own professional horizons broaden—he was scheduled to become host of a new NPR call-in show in late 1991—those of most of broadcast journalism seem static, incapable of moving forward and not fighting very hard to avoid falling backward.

John Merrow is one of a kind as a media figure. Estimable and innovative though his work continues to be, it boggles the rational mind to realize that he has no competition. None. At a time when school reform is supposedly at or near the top of every public policy agenda and 250 million Americans seem to agree that it belongs there, only one national television journalist devotes full-time to education. How can this be?

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CHAPTER 6

TELEVISION'S ENDANGERED SPECIES

ON ITS GOOD DAYS, THE NEGLECTED TV DOCUMENTARY, ONCE television's pride, can offer a compelling look at the achievements and discontents of public education. Typifying the contemporary best of what TV documentary pioneer Burton Benjamin calls "an endangered species" was "Teacher, Teacher," a penetrating one-hour look by the Public Broadcasting Service's respected "Frontline" series in June 1990 at the flow and weave of school life in a middle American community in Minnesota.

Nobody in "Teacher, Teacher" emerged unscathed or bathed in glory. Even the three above-average teachers whom it profiled took their share of the flak. The program's unsurprising main messages—that unprepared children, external social pressures, and weak public support are threatening our schools—came across as devastating yet inevitable. It didn't matter, for once, that the students, teachers, school board members, and voting citizens who filled the screen were white middle-class Americans. The chief messages of "Teacher, Teacher" are universal, sometimes inspiring but more often dispiriting.

What gave this single-shot documentary hour its uniqueness was its carefully balanced use of evidence and thoughtful presentational technique. Unlike the four-part "Crisis: Urban Education," which had aired in April, "Teacher, Teacher" avoided the TV cliché of national experts repeating their tired homilies. Instead, the "Frontline" production bolted from tradition by moving at a natural story-telling pace across a town's educational landscape without employing visiting experts to explain to viewers what they were seeing.

As the hour progressed, the principal players became well-realized figures engaged, in their different styles and roles, in a common pursuit complete with unyielding frustrations and very small victories. By the

end of the show, the teachers had reluctantly accepted an unsatisfactory salary settlement that left them the region's worst paid. A gifted teacher had earned an MBA in her spare time and was abandoning a 14-year classroom career. And an academically marginal student who couldn't master double-digit multiplication had been tutored to success by an already overburdened fifth-grade teacher.

By most critical criteria, the show was top-flight television, "a sobering social chronicle" in the judgment of *USA Today*'s TV critic.[1] No belly laughs or wrenching tragedies, just an absorbing slice of contemporary school life in an average American community. But it also provided a sense of the distance that even public TV must still travel in portraying our schools. Only occasionally did "Teacher, Teacher" question the hoary concept of lecturing teacher and passive student listener. With but slight adjustments in dress and hair style, parent-school connections appeared largely unchanged from those of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, this mainstream school system's leaders seemed unaware that the tidal wave of literature and recent experience on how to improve schools could be of some help to them.

Some of the scenes in "Teacher, Teacher" were chillingly effective in baring the malaises of our schools. When a prosperous town father vigorously defended an anti-tax wave because the schools weren't giving the community its money's worth, many viewers could nod in agreement. And the comment of the MBA-holder that teachers no longer enjoyed respect was embarrassingly close to the bone. These were no hackneyed observations by battle-weary observers; they tell much of the story that the media are still struggling to capture. Sometimes, as in "Teacher, Teacher," they get most of it right.

Two months earlier, PBS's "Crisis: Urban Education" had essayed a more complex task: four eye-opening half-hour documentaries, presented as two one-hour programs on consecutive weeks, on the people and problems of urban schools in New Jersey, New York City, and Rochester, New York. Except for an uplifting visit to the publicity-saturated Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, New York (which has a special office to assist visitors!) and a look at developments in almost as well-covered Rochester, New York (where the jury on the fate of drastic reform in school governance and teacher responsibility may be out for years to come), the documentaries presented an unrelentingly negative image of failing educational systems. Geared to the school reform movement, "Crisis . . ." plowed hard new ground in portraying the limitless obstacles to success that these schools face. They were all there: dropouts, truancy, pregnancy, drugs, the near-

abandonment of discipline—the hopelessness that pervades so many of today's urban schools. If the two hours fell short of "Teacher, Teacher" as television fare, they surely merited high marks for exposing the raw underside of public education.

The nation was underwhelmed. By television's criteria of audience measurement, almost no one watched either "Teacher, Teacher" or "Crisis . . ." Facing average weekday competition (a situation comedy, an early-round professional basketball playoff game, and various undistinguished offerings on cable), "Teacher, Teacher" garnered an audience share of three percent of the evening's viewers. Many of them may have watched because it was the last offering of the season for PBS's dependably high-quality "Frontline" series. But "Crisis: Urban Education" was a ratings disaster. It was carried by only a handful of stations and drew but a 1.1 percent share of the nation's viewers for its time slots. Yet all systems were go. The mighty International Business Machines underwrote it, a blue-ribbon panel of well-regarded educational statespersons comprised an advisory panel, and WNET, one of public broadcasting's flagship stations (and a tireless promoter of good education reporting), produced it.

The social-issue documentary, according to media critic Pat Aufderheide, " . . . has, for too long, connoted earnest, good-for-you stuff that is at its most popular when it's at its safest . . ."[2] What passed for the documentary form on the networks in the 1980s was a magpie's nest of shows of questionable, sometimes execrable, taste interspersed with occasional specials produced to preserve a network's reputation for social responsibility. When true quality does materialize, it is often in programs or series such as "P.O.V." (point of view), which ran over parts of the PBS system in the summer of 1991, its fourth year on the air. These largely unseen programs offered thoroughly original documentary fare demonstrating "that the independent artist engaged with the world is a resource worth cultivating in a conglomerated televisual universe."[3] Unfortunately, none of P.O.V.'s creative techniques were applied to the attention-compelling examination by the visual media that the schools still need so desperately.

In what has become an annual ritual, television transforms back-to-school week each September into a time of public catharsis for the schools. For 1990, a year that saw few newsworthy events in education, ABC and NBC skipped the chance to weigh in with separate documentary shows. Having paid a portion of their dues in earlier years, they left the field to CBS, PBS, and the increasingly involved Cable News Net-

work. The results were better than the schools had any reason to expect but, as always, the ratings were lower than the average for their time slots—a devastating but inescapable fact about TV documentaries on education.

The 1990 offerings were determinedly upbeat. No school problem, they seemed to be saying, defied solution, and most were beginning to come under control. At the heart of CBS's ambitious two-hour "America's Toughest Assignment: Solving the Education Crisis" was the premise that ways to improve the schools are already in place. Various combinations of them, the program asserted, contain the main ingredients of a reform package. Supporting the CBS thesis, PBS's more modest one-hour report on "Learning in America: Schools That Work" scored solidly with visits to elementary schools in Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Texas. In all four, reported Roger Mudd of PBS, reporters found parental involvement, enlightened discipline, faith in the schools, and an unacknowledged ability to meet the needs of students that were not met at home.

In neither of these programs nor in CNN's "The Education Revolution" were the hackneyed themes of drugs, violence, or competition with Japan accorded more than glancing recognition. Positive messages also abounded in less pretentious but equally powerful local programming, from KTEH/San Jose, California's "Why Do These Kids Love School?" (in Lowell and Cambridge, Massachusetts; New Orleans; Jackson, Mississippi; and Golden, Colorado) to WUSA/Washington, D.C.'s "22:26", which examined the E Street Book Club, a Saturday reading club for schoolchildren in a crime-infested District of Columbia neighborhood.

How useful are these and other productions that pour onto TV screens when school begins? Their value certainly can't be quantified, but surely education will profit in the long run from having its daily life examined by qualified reporters and experts. Each year, too, the production values of these programs improve. Top-of-the-profession critics such as Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* and Walter Goodman of the *New York Times* are saying nice things about them. After several years of slipping in the mud at the starting gate, producers and TV journalists have begun to hit the track running. Some of them no longer assume that viewers are stuck at square one or ground zero with little relevant knowledge of the changing conditions of education. Parts of the TV industry have begun to credit their consumers with some sense of the schools and are pitching their output accordingly.

The tone of this greater all-round sophistication became evident in the 1990 productions. The TV screen was not merely a cultural disturbance. It carried distinct messages that school learning is an ever-evolving experience. Time-honored ways of arranging for children to accumulate knowledge, competence, and good sense need fixing, even replacing. The ideal school is no longer a neat suburban building that produces its nearly predictable quota of accommodating young workers and future college freshmen. It may be a school-within-a-school in a crumbling inner-city building where children spend most of the day on a single inter-disciplinary project. Or a place where normal sixth-graders are comfortable with high school-level mathematics. Or a public school in which only French or Spanish or Japanese is spoken—by native English-speaking children. In some schools, at least, sea changes are in train. The number of these schools may be far lower than media coverage implies, but a few are out there, and good journalists are finding them.

Such salutary signs tell only a part of the story. Regrettably, documentaries do not reach the massive audiences that the most imbecilic situation comedies routinely capture. Viewers perceive nothing singular or urgent in most of TV's efforts to spotlight the schools. Watching such shows becomes a civic obligation, rewarding after a fashion but a basically tedious interlude in a weekday evening, a kind of conscience-absolver that might improve one's standing with the children and their teacher (who, already surfeited with school problems, probably didn't watch the shows). In a squeeze, seeing one of those programs could conceivably work off one's guilt for not attending a PTA meeting or voting in a school board election.

People who turn on these programs, moreover, are likely to be members of education's natural constituency: enlightened parents, readers of newspapers, magazines, and books, faithful voters, public officials, and other traditional school backers. For this population, education documentaries are, by and large, not knowledge-creating; at best they are information-increasing. A vastly larger potential audience, the one whose children are poorly served by the schools, is fated to remain oblivious to the televised wisdom of education's favorite spokespersons. But they watch "Roseanne" and "Married . . . with Children."

When the judges at dog shows evaluate the finalists of seven to ten different breeds, their criteria are the standard characteristics of the breeds represented and not a list of specifications for exactly how an all-purpose champion should look and act. Though they prance in the

same ring, samoyeds do not actually compete with poodles nor whippets with schnauzers; they are measured instead against the explicit criteria of the best of their own breed. But we are not nearly as discriminating in deciding which television programs we especially enjoy or appreciate. Seldom do we differentiate among breeds or classes of programs. We tend to lump all together, if we can remember them, before choosing a sports event or dramatic film or whatever. A few consensus choices in each genre may compel attention, but they are usually submerged in the 1,000-plus individual offerings, many of them dogs, available to most Americans every week. Last week's smash hit is this week's blur.

In 11 unforgettable hours spread over five evenings in the early autumn of 1990 and repeated in 1991, the documentary breed established new, tradition-busting criteria of excellence. "The Civil War" will never become a blur to the 14 million Americans who watched it on PBS—the largest audience public television in America had ever known. The reality exceeded the raves of critics who viewed it before the public showing. Heavy advance advertising and endorsements, rare for any PBS offering, did not do it justice. In commercial terms, it was a "breakout hit" and a major deviation from the norm. It tripled the usual PBS audience, got on major magazine covers, and brought back the miniseries as a TV form.[4] Good business, good art, good television, good education.

Consisting mostly of superbly sequenced black-and-white photographs, maps, and paintings with accompanying music and readings, "The Civil War" represented " . . . simultaneously the best of television and the best of journalism too . . . not full of cheap effects, of manufactured smoke and thunder, of false conflict and synthetic emotion."[5] In dozens of ways it stirred its viewers to reconsider the correctness of our belief systems. At a time when war in the Middle East was threatening, "The Civil War" provided a useful perspective on the meaning of national purpose and a powerful understanding of the terrible consequences of armed conflict.

The coming generation of documentary-makers will critique "The Civil War" as thoroughly as a real estate developer dissects demographic data. Its lessons are limitless. Those who will be telling the story of our schools for television might do well to consider these:

- Contemporary televised images of children in school, teachers at work, and quotable experts at the ready may be the safe way to go, but there may be better or alternative ways. Traditional modes customarily offer little that is new and much that is

deadeningly familiar, often downright tiresome. "The Civil War" made no concessions to television's favored presentational styles.

- Outstanding writing, read well by real people instead of TV actors and script-readers, can have a stunning effect in a visual medium. It is not necessary to feed TV's high-intensity talking heads the right lines for the right occasion. Some of our unknown ancestors said the same things much better more than a century ago.
- Libraries and archives are surfeited with tons of memoirs, photographs and exploitable wisdom about learning and becoming an educated person. The research for today's documentaries on education is superficial and deplorably short of historical perspective. "The Civil War" was a masterpiece of thoroughly prepared documentation.
- Producer Ken Burns did not try to accommodate "The Civil War" to likely audience characteristics and anticipated impacts. The show could almost as easily have been made in the early days of television or even of talking pictures. Its pace was deliberate, and there was no glitzy technological virtuosity. We already knew the story it told, yet nightly audiences actually grew during the five days.
- People were the centerpiece of "The Civil War." All 11 hours were intensely human. They showed what Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. called "the incommunicable experience of war." There may be a similar experience in learning in which, to quote Holmes, "We have felt, we will feel, the passion of life to its top . . . In our youths, our hearts were touched by fire."
- Editorializing was kept to a minimum. Judgments were largely absent. An audience already familiar with Civil War lore (just as any American audience is familiar with our schools) came to its own conclusions. *Newsweek* may have said it best, "But surely that is not the last word on the Civil War. We live eternally in its shadow, as well as its light—all of us, white and black, North and South . . ."[6] The lines would not be inappropriate for public education.

The inhibitions and institutional barriers that have restrained documentary-makers from X-raying American school life with the brilliance of "The Civil War" are formidable but not forbidding. Though the subject is vast and the material limitless, the potential for transforming it into

absorbing viewing should still be within reach. The intensity level of "The Civil War," our national tragedy-triumph, may appear unattainable, especially for a markedly less dramatic topic, but different approaches and goals can nevertheless yield comparable results for education.

Education's seminal documentary, Frederick Wiseman's "High School," a black-and-white film which was broadcast on PBS (and financed by a combination of resources from WNET-TV, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the BBC, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, and a variety of foundations), proceeds from some of the same assumptions as Burns's "The Civil War." But it is even less overtly viewer-friendly. It makes no concessions to either journalistic convention or audience convenience. There is no scene-setting, no Tom Brokaw or Judy Woodruff to guide the untutored viewer, no music, no narration, no post-mortem, no technical necromancy. Instead, as in all 16 of his major documentaries ("High School," the chronological second, came out in 1968), Wiseman "plunges the unguided and sometimes baffled viewer into the life of an institution . . . [and] puts together . . . a portrait that has the suspense not of narrative but of a sustained, detailed argument about values and experience."[7]

By not overreaching to embrace faddish notions about secondary education and teen-agers, Wiseman succeeds superbly in making a central point: that the students of a typical Philadelphia high school in the unstable late 1960s were studying freedom in a way that would discourage them from being free.

This is deadly serious business. Whether merited or not, this implicit indictment of American high schools immediately raised "High School" to a level of passion and cogency unmatched by any documentary on education before or since its release nearly a quarter of a century ago. Wiseman did not set out to present a balanced picture. The mosaic he assembled and organized—of students, teachers, administrators, of the joyless school climate—could lead only to the disturbing conclusions he reached. Like them or not, we must be deeply moved by their stark implications.

Twenty-three years after "High School" first appeared, Fox Broadcasting, the country's newest commercial network, which had been noted until then largely by the tastelessness of "The Simpsons" and "Married . . . with Children," offered a sharp departure from Wiseman's gray image of high school life, as the senior class of the 1,600-student Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, subjected itself to the cameras of a team of documentary-makers who stalked the corridors,

cafeterias, activities centers, and sports facilities of their better-than-average school.

By focussing on issues related to growing up, Fox's "Yearbook" series performed a notable service. It showed students as people, not merely as learners in a restricted institutional ambiance. Glenbard West became a locale, a combination of social center, place of business, and outlet for mental and physical energy. With little self-consciousness, the show dug deep into the lives of its subjects. It described the impact of the Persian Gulf War on student life. A student rock band was spotlighted. A couple faced parenthood with little awareness of its implications. The dilemmas and doubts of a super-achiever received a sympathetic airing as the competition for homecoming queen unfolded. The interplay between team and coach exposed the uneasy state of adolescent-authority figure relations. "Yearbook" covered nearly everything, in short, except the daily grind of academic learning.

The omission was deliberate. The series was about growing up in the community of youth, not about taking courses. Though some of the individual episodes offered little more than glimpses of the evolving world of teen-agers, their cumulative effect was a searching look at what our 17-year-olds are like. On the whole, as reviewers of the program observed, they are younger versions of today's adults.

Like "All Our Children," the Bill Moyers PBS special of April 10, 1991, "Yearbook" broke new ground for television in examining the issues that affect young people. Above all, these programs seemed to say, they are not primarily students or schoolchildren, any more than adults are primarily workers. In showing how they think and act, the TV documentary may be the first media form to get this point across to the American public.

Paradoxically, the documentary is both the "endangered species" that Burton Benjamin decried and an oasis of hope for telling education's story. The entertainment networks and such big-money cable systems as *Lifetime*, USA, *Family*, and TNT barely acknowledge its existence, but *The Discovery Channel*, *The Learning Channel*, and *Arts and Entertainment* offer program menus packed with documentaries, some of them overused veterans but others of very recent vintage. The redoubtable C-SPAN, with its audience of true believers and political junkies, is by some criteria a non-stop, 24-hour-a-day example of the genre.

Year in and year out, though, the Public Broadcasting Service's documentaries outperform the others. Despite its poorly concealed elitism, unrelenting anglophilia, and unwarranted smugness, PBS is still the documentary fan's favorite source. It was PBS that showed "High

School," "Learning in America," "Teacher, Teacher," and numerous others. As the 1990s dawned, the ever-impoverished (and ever-defensive) PBS was still actively courting corporate support, by some standards a dubious activity for a public media enterprise. But those dollars from American business were also helping it to consolidate its position in the otherwise neglected world of documentaries, especially those with spirit and fresh outlooks.

Week after week, such PBS series as "Frontline," "Nova," and "The American Experience" offer a tremendous range of incisive reporting on everything from the Wall Street crash of 1929 to the latest research on schizophrenia. Education is in excellent company when PBS features it, but there is a necessary next step. Education must gain an accepted foothold, a regular spot on the PBS agenda—a weekly program that does for learning and the schools what the estimable "Nova" does for science and the environment. But with an audience share that hovers permanently in the two percent range, about 15 percent of the average viewership of each commercial network, PBS remains one of television's bit players.

Many of today's serious documentaries are thoughtful presentations that leave us informed and healthily curious. They refute the stereotyped contention that television "has helped make us a less reflective people with shorter attention spans."[8] As a general proposition, though, they do not impose moral and intellectual choices on us. They usually leave us unmoved and unchallenged. Somehow, the problems of public education do not come across often enough as OUR problems. We have invested vast emotional and financial resources in the schools, and they should be performing better. A civic society requires at least that. But it may not be enough. The communications media of a literate culture should be probing deeply into what kind of society the schools are helping to create. Once the showpiece of broadcast journalism, the TV documentary has fallen on hard times. Except on the rare occasions when it yields such shows as "Teacher, Teacher," "Yearbook," "Learning in America," and, of course, "High School," it is still not doing its job.

CHAPTER 7

THE INDIFFERENT PUNDITS

OF THE DIVERSE MEDIA VOICES CAPABLE OF SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION on the schools, columns by journalists of national reputation may be the most disappointing. The pundits rarely bother with public education. Given a choice between commenting on Croatian economic prospects or a revolutionary development affecting inner city schools, their decision on a topic for 800 words of solemn pontification is foreordained. The Croats would win in a walk.

Syndicated columnists impart a kind of intellectual respectability to editorial and op-ed pages and, occasionally, to TV news and public affairs programs. Whatever their philosophical bent, they are for the most part worldly men with wide-ranging interests and a superior grasp of the forces and processes that drive public policy. They are consummately literate and can synthesize complex ideas in expressive yet succinct language. They delight in absorbing new, unexamined information. Many are unabashed fact-blotters with an enviable knack for enlisting data in the service of ideology. To readers in many communities, nationally syndicated columns are a welcome change from the otherwise insipid editorial fare of their local newspapers.

When it comes to education, though, most columnists are unembarrassed traditionalists. When they do comment, as during the "Education Summit" in Charlottesville, Virginia, in September 1989, the drift of their analysis is numbingly predictable. The normally pervasive matter of political orientation recedes, and an idealized mental image of schools as they used to be, or as the writers choose to remember them, takes over. Whether liberal or conservative, their commentary is a set piece of orthodox, even ossified, wisdom. The villains are school bureaucracies, the erosion of such fundamental values as discipline and homework, and a core of supposedly incompetent teachers. To many of

our op-ed page analysts, educational reform customarily means dragging the schools back a half-century as rapidly as possible. If old-fashioned, no-nonsense schools worked for them, why shouldn't they succeed for today's children?

While this familiar litany has some appeal, it is a largely unconsidered reaction. It simply ignores decades of breakthroughs in many sectors of education as well as sea changes in demography and social policy. The opinion columnist who interviews a dozen sources and reads 150 pages of from-the-scene reporting before composing a piece on, say, the U.S. negotiating stance on military bases in the Philippines, will blithely unleash a fiery blast against the schools with almost no briefing or current factual background. Education is like politics, sex, and baseball; we are certain that we know all there is to know.

Perversely, this lack of thoughtful commentary may not be an altogether bad thing. If the columnists were to write often and knowledgeably about the schools, education's spokespersons might find themselves in a real bind. All but a few of public education's defenders would be out of their league in verbal or literary confrontations with the nation's think-piece artisans. They would be hard put, for example, to refute charges that student achievement has wobbled or that violence pervades many urban schools. Besides, the possibility that a rare shot at the schools by a Tom Wicker or a George Will, who have boatloads of other fish to fry, would cause an immediate ruckus in state legislatures or governors' offices probably ranges from zero to negligible. To the big-name pundits, the most explosive educational issue imaginable would probably not score 2.3 on a journalistic Richter scale.

It does rankle, though, that so many nominal supporters of a sensible, proactive social policy tend to be as unthinkingly harsh on the schools as their less charitable peers. To take one example, David Broder, one of the few national columnists who worry in print about education, has peppered his syndicated columns with tough, sometimes excessive criticism of the schools. After a refreshing burst of candor—when he correctly labeled William Bennett the James Watt of the second Reagan term—Broder consistently identified himself with Bennett's loose-cannon assaults and left little doubt that he favored returning schools to the good old days when he was a student (probably a superior one against difficult odds).

By most reasonable measures, the situation of the schools should be a topic of regular discussion by the media's more cerebral analysts. Some readers may deem it even more newsworthy than flag-burning or Imelda Marcos. But that is not the case, nor has it been for a generation

or more, or perhaps ever. Even in the golden age of newspaper columns, when the work of a relatively small number of stars such as Walter Lippmann, Dorothy Thompson (who did write about the schools from time to time), Marquis Childs, Westbrook Pegler, and a bit later, Arthur Krock and Drew Pearson, was devoured by a public still free of the spell of television, the schools were virtually off-limits.

In those days, though, the reasons for bypassing them were infinitely nobler than today's rationales. It was an accepted article of American faith that public education was the very foundation of our successful experiment in democracy. Not only was it doing its job—usually with underpaid teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and dictatorial administrators—but it was doing it with distinction. This granitic verity evoked such a powerful consensus that even the most responsible critical commentary would have been considered heretical. Many observant Americans sensed that much was wrong and that the role of non-school factors was greatly underestimated, but the burden of analysis stayed largely within the profession.

Today's most widely syndicated columnists can choose from a smorgasbord of subjects. With scattered exceptions, though, they have become captives of the priorities of political administrations. In practice, this means that they share the fixation with politics, foreign affairs, and national security that has dominated every presidency since Franklin Roosevelt's. Unlike domestic social policy, the realm of international affairs offers the possibility of exotic travel and the prospect of witnessing history in the making. Some journalists have even become part of it. Far from least, commenting on events beyond our borders furnishes an opportunity to work in an area that permits huge margins for error. When the tensions of foreign policy lift, the elite columnists usually have a political aftermath to analyze. And when that ebbs, the chronically troubled economy or even the environment beckons for attention.

By any reckoning, the institution of the syndicated opinion column remains one of journalism's most powerful and durable features. Of all the species of newspaper writing, it has been the principal one to benefit from the contemporary surge of electronic news coverage. Its symbiotic ties to the panel and talk (or scream and holler) shows that dot the schedules of television and radio have, if anything, reinforced its standing. A turn of the radio dial or push of a remote control button is bound to yield the voice or image (or both) of many of the nation's leading newspaper columnists.

A typical weekend of national public affairs broadcasting in late 1990 showcased the wit and wisdom of columnists James J. Kilpatrick,

Pat Buchanan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Cohen, Elizabeth Drew, Mark Shields, Morton Kondracke, Robert Novak, Fred Barnes, George Will, Haynes Johnson, Jack Germond, Charles Krauthammer, Ellen Goodman, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Carl Rowan, the longest-lasting of a growing but still tiny band of black syndicated columnists. The implications of their ability to discourse fluently in two or more media are obvious. Nearly all of these and several dozen others are also well-promoted book authors, magazine writers, radio commentators and guests on such respected weekday public affairs programs as "Nightline" and "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour." But the identity they cherish before any other is that of syndicated newspaper columnist.

The dual role of columnist and television personality has led some of the better-known figures to lucrative sidelines as circuit-riders on the lecture trail. Contrary to popular impression, even the most widely distributed columns are not major money-makers for their authors. But their regular visibility on nationally broadcast panels and talk shows (which frequently degenerate into simplistic shoutfests, a kind of "skinhead TV") make them instantly recognizable attractions, virtual showbiz personalities, beyond the Washington beltway. The McLaughlin Group's core members—Buchanan, Germond, Kondracke and Barnes—frequently present ensemble variations of their weekly show for handsome fees at conventions of business and professional groups around the country.

These prominent columnists can command staggering fees ($5,000 to $20,000 per appearance in the early 1990s) for an hour-long rehash of Washington gossip and insider political talk. (Veteran journalist's advice to neophyte: "Sell everything you write at least three times.") Whatever else may go into the hash, education is not an ingredient. While participants in business conventions and seminars have become accustomed to thoughtful speeches on children and learning by educational spokespersons of the calibre of Albert Shanker, Lamar Alexander, Ernest Boyer, and Denis Doyle, they do not expect such heavy hitters as Will or Kilpatrick (who first gained national notice as a strident opponent of school desegregation) to discuss them. Journalism's marquee names are there to hold forth on Saddam Hussein, gun control, and elections that may be two years away—the important things.

Whatever their message may be and whether they deserve it or not (most do), columnists are read, seen and heard by the nation's decision-makers and, almost equally important, their gurus and gatekeepers. It is less clear today how respectful their reception may be. Some, such as Broder, impart instant legitimacy to an issue or cause.

Certainly there has never been another columnist of the stature of Lippmann, who advised nearly every president from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson and actually drafted Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, or of Joseph Alsop, whose ardent espousal of U.S. intervention in Vietnam may have been a crucial element in persuading his friend John F. Kennedy to commit American forces. There is reason to suspect that their impact at this stratified level has weakened substantially since the Nixon administration, although Will was a Reagan confidant of sorts and lunched periodically with the First Lady.

The columnists nevertheless remain an acknowledged body of attention-compelling sages whose long-term influence on a concerned citizenry and its political leaders may be unmatched by any other group in public communication. A national leader would be unwise to ignore the imposing presence of the *New York Times*'s William Safire. Right or wrong, the avowedly conservative libertarian Safire is a thoroughly informed thinker with great sources and a superb mastery of the issues and of the English language. It almost goes without saying that he has paid no sustained attention to the schools. Nor have Will, Wicker, Jack Anderson, Anthony Lewis, or all but a tiny handful of their fellow seers.

The prospect that syndicated columnists will focus their formidable intellectual energies on education as they do on other public issues is far from bright. Most of the columnists are moderate to conservative middle-aged white men—at a time when the schools of our cities are serving a swiftly expanding population of poor children of color. Of the few nationally syndicated minority-origin columnists, only the *Washington Post's* contentious William Raspberry comments regularly on themes related to children, learning, and schools. Such female columnists as Ellen Goodman, Anna Quindlen, and Mary McGrory devote responsible thought and countless column inches to social concerns, but their enlightened opinions are too seldom discernible in the cacophony created by their male peers. Little or nothing is heard on these themes from such female elders as Jeane Kirkpatrick, Meg Greenfield, and Flora Lewis.

This is no small shortcoming. Despite the overwhelming preponderance of female teachers and the strong presence of woman reporters on the education beat throughout the country, the female approach to communication—generally constructive and cooperative, non-threatening and empathetic—is not usually to be found in the national columns when education or children's issues are featured. The nation's readers are the losers. The educational atavism of the big-name male columnists may have its place, but it badly needs to be counter-balanced by the

more relevant insights of journalism's best female analysts. A greatly broadened dissemination of the twice-weekly columns of the *New York Times*'s Quindlen would be a splendid start. Women, says Deborah Tannen, the author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Communications*, "tend to use language to create intimacy and connections." These are underplayed when journalism's wise men turn to stories on human needs and social institutions. Of the men, only Colman McCarthy lobbies uncompromisingly for person-based rather than budget-driven strategies.

Within their own cosmos, the several million people who work in education are similarly underexposed to policy-oriented editorial commentary. Hundreds of national, regional, and state education organizations, as well as a large collection of private publishers, regurgitate a limitless array of magazines, journals and newsletters. The quality and looks of some, such as *Teacher* and *Principal*, would do honor to any profession. Columnists abound throughout this self-contained constellation, but their output normally centers on the bread-and-butter issues of immediate concern to their specialized professional constituencies. Of the three principal all-purpose national education publications—*Education Week*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the monthly *Phi Delta Kappan*—only the latter, with approximately 150,000 mostly influential subscribers and a large pass-along readership of teachers and education leaders, regularly provides space for broadly based editorial opinion. Anne Lewis's monthly *Kappan* column from Washington provides a top-notch analyst's insights into current and emerging issues. It merits dissemination far beyond the field.

Any assessment of the ultimate place of the pundits must hinge on their recent record. Have they offered a conceptual backdrop that merits the respect of decision-makers? Do they have insights that a public figure's inner circle of advisors and information sources might lack? Can they help concerned readers make up their minds about important public matters? More bluntly, have they been right or wrong most of the time?

It is indisputable that what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. calls "the panjandrums of the Opinion Mafia" are often brilliant in their analysis of the top of the news. But their overall record in spotting trends, a central feature of a reputable columnist's professional repertoire, is no better than that of the editors and reporters who fail repeatedly to isolate trees from forests. In presidential politics, for example, few believed it possible, even conceivable, when their primary campaigns began, that Richard Nixon ("You won't have Nixon to kick around any more," after

his defeat in the 1962 California gubernatorial campaign), Jimmy Carter (1976), or Ronald Reagan (1976) would make it to the White House except as dinner guests. The gravity of the savings and loan debacle blew by the oblivious or otherwise engaged pundits even as its dimensions seemed to be expanding geometrically. The 1989 revolutions in a half-dozen East European countries came as a surprise to virtually every columnist in American journalism. Only an unknown British commentator, Timothy Garton Ash, in a series of astonishing reports in the *New York Times Review of Books*, spotted the imminent collapse of the totalitarian regimes. But Ash's route to his riveting forecasts would be anathema to most of his American colleagues. He learned the languages, cultivated close and sometimes dangerous ties with the emerging leaders, and read everything he could get his hands on long before chaos descended.

Education's tale belongs to the endless list of stories missed and trends misread. It may be too much to hope that journalism's megastars will weigh in sensibly on what has been happening in and to the schools. But it is conceivable that the pronouncements of the media's best and brightest would help to spark a genuine public debate on public education. No one has yet snapped at the bait. In the right hands, the admittedly slow-moving story of change in the schools could become an absorbing and productive specialty.

The absence of a focussed national column on education worsens the already severe problem of inadequate information-sharing by schools and education professionals. Since well before the establishment in the early 1970s of the now-disbanded National Institute of Education, which had the unenviable task of disseminating applicable research findings, the U.S. government and the teacher unions have had indifferent success in promoting the adoption of "the best of educational practice" by the nation's schools. The word gets out to school districts through the small, well-managed National Diffusion Network and such primer-level publications as the Department of Education's *What Works*. Though anecdotal evidence suggests that they reach some of their targets some of the time, these materials are only technically in the public domain. For the most part, they are simply a trickle in the flood of paper that crosses the typical district school superintendent's desk. Rarely do they command the attention of parents or the larger public. Even the weekly columns by Albert Shanker, which originate as paid advertisements in the Sunday *New York Times* and are picked up gratis by 60 to 80 additional newspapers, do not appear to have made much

of a dent beyond the large circle of educators who admire the high intelligence he invariably displays.

It is a large leap from officially disseminated research data, some of it obvious and repetitive, and subsidized columns by teacher union leaders to the musings of big-time national pundits. And when the columnists take time out from politics and national security to examine social problems, they can hardly be expected to expostulate on the advantages of more homework or of parents reading to their children, two of the banalities of *What Works*. Instead they tend to dilate on such topics as the sinister economic meaning of the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or violence, drug use, and immorality among high school children.

"If politicians are to be able to decide what the electorate wants," says media chronicler Jude Wanniski, "they have to have the parameters of the debate communicated to them by the scriveners." This has yet to happen in education. Literally and symbolically, the columnists are still failing to get at what ails elementary and secondary education—and what is still good about it. Their infrequent acknowledgment of the nation's 50 million schoolchildren is perfunctory and poorly informed. They do a disservice to our schools and to our children.

PROFILE

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"America's Schools: Who Gives a Damn?"

"ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS ON SCHOOL REFORM," SAID A CHICAGO-based literary critic some years ago, "are the bottom of the barrel, a particularly gruesome form of slow death."

The assertion is still valid. Put a few "educational change agents" in a conference room for an hour or so, with or without cameras and microphones, and sleep, if not expiration, is nearly inevitable.

Once in a great while, though, it works differently. Something clicks and issues come to life. Education's pundits are energized into offering thoughtful analysis rather than predictable formulas. Audiences come away enlightened. Everyone wins.

In their 18th year, the Columbia University Seminars on Media and Society tackled America's schools, and nearly everybody won. For the roughly two million people who watched PBS at 10:00 p.m. EDT on April 1 and 2, 1991, "America's Schools: Who Gives a Damn?" demonstrated that groups talking about education need not be slow death. Far from it. The exchanges between moderators Charles Nesson and Charles Ogletree of Harvard Law School in separate sessions with their 16- and 18-person panels, and those among contentious panelists, were spirited and illuminating.

The technique of Socratic dialogue, which the Columbia Seminars employ, seems uniquely suited to discussions of educational policy issues. In more than 250 seminars and workshops and 65 television programs here and abroad, this deceptively simple format has featured 14-20 persons seated around a U-shaped table answering questions posed to them by skilled, fast-reacting moderators about a hypothetical case. The technique discourages polemics and oratory by forcing participants to respond to lifclike situations in which, according to founder-director Fred W. Friendly, a pioneer in TV news and public affairs, "the agony of decision-making is so intense they can escape only by thinking." Far too little hard thinking occurs when education's talking heads converse. There were flashes of it, though, on April 1 and 2, 1991.

At first glance the all-star cast of panelists should have aced the initial questions and situations Nesson and Ogletree offered: Why should a bright young college graduate go into teaching, and why shouldn't 13-year-old Sam from the inner city drop out of school? In a normal gathering of members of education's road company of experts (John Chubb, Joseph Fernandez, Chester Finn, Bill Honig, Diane Ravitch, and Adam Urbanski of that amorphous group took part in both segments), the discussions would probably have followed well-marked paths to blandly conventional outcomes. On "America's Schools. . ." they led to broadly developed themes, larger questions, and only uneven consensus.

By the end of the two hours, Nesson and Ogletree had brought forth truckloads of hard data and a strong awareness of the roadblocks to improving schools, including telling comments from former Senator and Secretary of Labor William Brock ("The national will has been missing. The parental involvement has been missing"), Texas state legislator Wilhelmina Delco ("in . . . most states now, the wrestling takes place between whether we put money in schools or prisons—and prisons are winning"), and New York school principal Deborah Meier ("I think teaching is an extraordinary opportunity. But it is filled with pain . . . . with humiliation of an extraordinary depth.")

Columbia's singular Seminars invariably succeed in creating "a structured dialogue where hard thinking, candor, and humor prevail over rhetoric and pretense." But although "America's Schools . . ." was no exception, it did not always sparkle brightly. The well-tested format was ideal for the subject, but the views of some of the participants appeared to be permanently cemented and thus unlikely ever to admit to compromise. And for such participating politicians as New Jersey Governor Jim Florio and Texas Lieutenant Governor William P. Hobby, who face crushing problems of financial equity in their states, it must have been discouraging to encounter theorists and publicists who seem to have given up on public education and have no serious interest in helping urban schools in particular.

It is never easy to select a truly representative, mentally quick cross-section of experts and policy-shapers for any discussion group. In the novel *Sign Off* by network veteran Jon Katz, the talent-hunter for a morning news show is portrayed as a genius because she can quickly deliver experts for any breaking story—Henry Kissinger, for example, on the implications of an explosion on a U.S. Navy vessel in Portugese waters. A similar trend has taken over in the media's coverage of the schools. Even when a current classroom teacher does appear,

as one did on "America's Schools . . .", it is a former national Teacher of the Year, an experienced panelist who is well-known to the others. There appears to be no room at the table for education's real mavericks—the leaders of alternative educational movements, parents who teach their children at home rather than enroll them in public schools, or veterans of the school wars of the 1960s and 1970s who may have much to teach today's reformers.

This may have been the only serious weakness of "America's Schools . . ." But it is one that afflicts all of the media when they cover education, and it was not of the Columbia Seminars' making. The educators who appeared were intellectually agile and well equipped for their task. They were and are likely to remain the premier spokespersons for their fields and doctrinal outlooks. But the quality of their dialogue did not approach that of the eminent politicians, professors, and jurists who made the Seminars' magnificent "The Constitution: That Delicate Balance" and "Ethics in America" so memorable.

In dealing with education, the Columbia Seminars were confronted with a contemporary crisis, one that did not fully lend itself to the subtle probing that might enrich a discussion of ethics or the constitution. They did it well. Friendly has never sought blueprints for action. What he has wanted since the programs began in 1974 is a "forum to resolve differences or, at least, to promote understanding." "America's Schools: Who Gives a Damn?" filled that bill even though we may never know whether a single mind was changed. And the airing of education's major issues by the respected Columbia Seminars on Media and Society demonstrates anew that the schools have legitimacy as a major league news topic.

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CHAPTER 8

THE GREAT CABLE CAPER

THE RAPID CABLING OF AMERICA, DUE TO EXCEED 60 PERCENT OF THE nation's 98 million TV households in the early 1990s, is restyling, possibly revolutionizing, media coverage of public affairs. "The TV generation," says the *New York Times*, "is becoming the cable generation."

According to Michael Robinson, a Georgetown University political scientist who tracks public perceptions of current issues, the development of the CNN and C-SPAN systems, cable's public affairs stalwarts, may herald the most profound innovation in mass media communications since what CNN's spokespersons pointedly refer to as the entertainment networks settled into their head-to-head early evening newscasts more than a generation ago.[1] Between them, these two strikingly dissimilar services are a serious but welcome threat to the dominance of the networks. From CNN comes 24-hour up-to-the-minute national and global news coverage that, as the world witnessed during the Persian Gulf War, print journalism, radio, and the wire services cannot begin to match for timeliness. For its part, the non-profit C-SPAN has created a brand of video democracy capable of bringing unencumbered political and social events and commentary into 50 million-plus homes around the clock.

Cable television's potential for expanding public knowledge of learning-related issues is immense. It could help to create a public that is infinitely better informed—or it could lead to the worst information glut in history.

The two-fifths of the American population still without cable at the start of the 1990s may find it difficult to understand the hullabaloo about bush league TV that is reputedly based on ancient movies, reruns of unmourned comedy and adventure series, and endless second-rate

commercials. The growing number of Americans who have been able to buy in, however, see in cable something quite different: apparently boundless variety, stations that cater to their interests, consistently clear reception, and, if community and public access channels gain wider favor, more opportunities to talk back and to become involved in local affairs. These are potentially formidable assets that many school systems are already exploiting. Live telecasts of school board meetings may not threaten "Roseanne" or "Cheers," but they have their absorbing moments, some of surprising volatility.

The promise (or curse) of specialization or narrow-casting evokes the recent history of the mass-circulation magazine business. Once centered largely on such weekly all-purpose giants as *Life*, *Look*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and the news magazines, the industry shifted drastically in the 1970s and 1980s to a profile that features far more specialized publications catering to targeted group or individual tastes. They range from the prosperous *People* and *TV Guide* to a seemingly endless lineup of offerings on almost everything from automobiles to yachting. This trend is unmistakable in cable TV in its still-early stages. Though some specialized cable services, including educational channels, are having a difficult time getting a toehold in the industry, audience-targeting is clearly the wave of cable's future.

When cable TV's shakedown cruise ends and the more or less permanent pieces are in place, education will be all over the dial. Leaving aside for the moment CNN, C-SPAN, and the smorgasbord of public access and explicitly educational stations that usually come as part of local cable programming packages, most of the country's wired households will have available to them such education-oriented outlets as *The Learning Channel*, which is unabashedly instructional and collaborates closely with the schools and their national representatives; the *Arts and Entertainment Network*, a ratings threat to public television, to which it already compares favorably in some respects; *The Discovery Channel*, an aptly named service for all ages that prides itself on its close links to schools and teachers and was one of cable's great success stories of the late 1980s (and announced in early 1991 that it was purchasing *The Learning Channel*); and *Mind Extension University*, a more modest operation that features college-level courses.

These channels and networks, as well as others that will almost certainly come on board in the 1990s will doubtless reflect many of the concerns of school leaders. Supplementing its explicitly instructional fare, *The Learning Channel*, for example, airs such features as "Educa-

tion Today," which examines critical issues, "College USA," an introduction to college life at different campuses for students, parents, and teachers, and, beginning in late 1991, a regular program by and for teachers. In 1990 John Merrow's weekly TV magazine and monthly live call-in program, *Learning Matters*, quickly became the medium's most formidable regular feature program about education. Admittedly, audiences for such series are still infinitesimal by conventional network criteria. As cable's advance continues and its audiences sort themselves out, though, sizeable and loyal followings for these services could—and should—develop.

The new and ever-growing titan of news and public affairs programming on television is CNN, which spreadeagles the United States and reaches more than 100 countries around the globe, along with its junior partner, *Headline News*. The key numbers, according to Steven Haworth of CNN, are 24 hours and 22 minutes; the former, the overall length of CNN's daily coverage, and the latter, the amount of time each entertainment network actually allots to the news in its half-hour early evening newscast.[2] Equally crucial has been CNN's acceptance by policy-makers and the viewing public as a preeminent source of TV news. During the Persian Gulf War, CNN frequently drew larger audiences than the Big Three, and the dependence of top policy-makers on it for rapid coverage and sound analysis was one of the more fascinating sidelights to the conflict. Moreover, CNN's viewers tend to return frequently for updates—a boon to advertisers, the network, and the development of a better informed public. Before too long, CNN and local/regional newscasts, which are also exceptionally strong in many markets, could conceivably comprise most of the menu for television news, with the networks fighting unsuccessfully to remain the dominant players. It is doubtful that the national education community has grasped the full meaning of this burgeoning phenomenon.

In its ten-plus years, CNN's treatment of education has been neither better nor worse than its largely dependable performance in other areas—generally fair, reasonably thorough by the medium's standards, and lacking in challenging commentary. At the start of its second decade, CNN does not yet boast an in-house education capability to match its strong departments in business, sports, entertainment, and science and health, all of which, unlike education, have regular weekly programs. Yet, as it illustrated in Charlottesville in the last week of September 1989, CNN is capable of top-notch reporting on educational policy issues.

The first-team anchorperson, Bernard Shaw, set up shop on the University of Virginia campus three days before the "education summit." Throughout the week the problems, politics, and prospects of the schools received what for TV news was an unusually perceptive examination. Although 1,000 media representatives were on hand to milk all possible stories, press coverage tended to be bland in character (national goals do not translate comfortably into riveting TV images or engrossing prose), but TV in general and CNN and C-SPAN in particular managed to feed well on thin, spoon-fed gruel. Without putting any "spin" on the summit story, CNN effectively communicated the urgency and high stakes of educational improvement. Since the summit, CNN's new investigative unit has tackled the schools in a generally conventional fashion: decrying the lack of progress of reform, analyzing the plight of urban schools, and tapping most of the same sources the older networks have long used.

The "secondary" user group for CNN's reporting may be more influential than its regular clientele. Newsrooms in as many as 75 percent of the nation's daily newspapers tap unashamedly into CNN, and TV receivers in the offices of countless politicians, government officials, and corporate leaders are tuned to it through much of the workday. In the early 1990s, the spell of CNN, once regarded as Ted Turner's folly, has become global and nearly all-encompassing. Should it ever zero in on the schools, the airing of America's educational programs would receive an enormous boost.

Alone among television's various services, which revel in self-promotion, C-SPAN undersells its considerable virtues. Self-effacing to a fault, this one-of-a-kind nonprofit network cherishes its image as a nonpartisan chronicler of political news and public affairs trends and events. The political news ostensibly centers on the U.S. House of Representatives, which C-SPAN was created by the cable industry in 1979 to cover on a gavel-to-gavel schedule. The House is rarely in session for more than 1,000 hours a year, though, and C-SPAN is a round-the-clock service, which leaves 8,000-odd hours for it to use constructively. It fills them with nourishment that richly sustains growing numbers of the nation's political addicts: committee hearings, political conventions, special events, meetings of political and professional associations, viewer call-in-shows, editorial board meetings with publishers and editors of newspapers and news services, reruns of earlier programs, and a host of regular shows, including "Journalists' Roundtable," "Booknotes," "Capital Agenda," and "Communications Today," all of

which have featured education as a discussion subject. Since 1986, a second C-SPAN service, C-SPAN II, has been cablecasting start-to-finish live sessions of the U.S. Senate and, like its parent, presents an endless variety of public affairs events to about 40 percent of the 50 million TV households that are equipped to receive C-SPAN.

Education is not slighted in the C-SPAN universe. Neither is it a major feature, although at times it seems almost to dominate the network. Camera-ready C-SPAN teams pop up almost unexpectedly or on very short notice at such education-related events, especially in the Washington area, as Department of Education press conferences and Congressional committee hearings. With several hundred trade and professional groups in education conducting countless events in Washington, education receives heavy air time.

The virtuoso C-SPAN performance at Charlottesville began three days before the summit and continued through and beyond it, with live viewer call-in segments, interviews, post-mortems, and even the ceremonial pomp of the Presidential and gubernatorial entrances. It is no exaggeration to assert that in those four-plus days C-SPAN made available to its subscribing households as full a plate of national education politics and issues as television, or possibly any communications medium, has ever offered. Whether the audience was inspired or bored is probably immaterial; it was indisputably informed. No one in education could have asked for more (although the thorough and knowledgeable performance of the superb trade weekly, *Education Week*, which continued for weeks after the event, stands as the best overall coverage of the summit).

The C-SPAN style is unemotional and undemonstrative: no flashy camera angles, no fast-talking impresarios to interpret what the viewer can see and hear. The network's press kit is so understated that it barely qualifies as a publicity tool. Its annual budget, says media critic and C-SPAN booster Jeff Greenfield, wouldn't last three weeks at a commercial network news division. The interviewers, including Chairman and CEO Brian Lamb, who appears regularly, will never be mistaken for Phil Donahue or Oprah Winfrey. They nevertheless extract the best that a guest or panel can give in a relaxed, non-threatening style that produces stimulating, frequently important, conversation and invaluable insights. And C-SPAN is not usually bound by the studio clock. Programs may run for hours or until the time arrives for one of its relatively few firm commitments.

Despite this ostensibly idiosyncratic style, which is dictated more by the unpredictability of events than by any C-SPAN managerial quirks,

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the network has had a profound impact on the tactics of Congressional politics. Realizing that their performance on the floor and in committee sessions can be watched (or stopped) at the twist of a dial or the touch of a remote control button by almost half of the population, politicians have cleaned up their act. On the whole, they come to work better prepared than was the case before C-SPAN. They are less apt to act rashly in public. They clearly relish displaying themselves on screen as responsible, permanently electable statespersons who are also wise champions of their districts' and the nation's most strongly felt needs. Most have measured up well in the C-SPAN spotlight; only a few have become camera-happy show horses. Very few, it is safe to assume, are unaware of certain data about the C-SPAN audience: It is divided almost equally among Republicans, Democrats, and independents; well over 90 percent voted in each of the last two Presidential elections, as against 53 and 49 percent for the nation as a whole in 1984 and 1988; more than 60 percent cast ballots in the 1986 Congressional races; and the average C-SPAN viewer watches it almost ten hours per month.

The moguls of cable TV speak soberly of increasing the industry's profile in community service. But the question in what are still cable's early days has been, Which matters more to them, "industry's profile" or "community service?" With federal regulation of the economics of this huge and largely uncontrolled segment of the mass communications business nearing the horizon after a five-year hiatus, the question may become urgent. The notion of community-oriented programming, with its built-in educational content, is already a nearly unanimously accepted precondition that cable systems must meet, in varying degrees, in order to gain access to markets. Many cable operators have gotten away with providing very little, but others have been forced to set aside as many as seven or eight channels for city and county government, four-year and community colleges, school systems, citizen access, and various cultural, instructional, and public affairs purposes.

In most localities, these channels have up to now provided largely amateurish programming and have usually been woefully undersubscribed in both resources and public patronage. In a growing number of areas, mostly in smaller, more naturally cohesive communities around the country, however, they are becoming information centrals and rallying points for civic and educational activism. As a general rule, though, they are not yet serious factors in most markets. While their eventual role remains unchartable, their overall presence will expand as new franchises move into uncabled localities, the U.S. Congress and other

bodies revisit the industry in the early 1990s, and new technology arrives.

One recent-developing phenomenon that may open new possibilities for spreading the word about educational issues is the proliferation of news-based local cable stations that are seeking specialized clienteles. An article in the September 1989 issue of the TV trade journal *Channels* (which folded in 1990) commented that this search is kindling broader attention to the kind of "hyperlocal" coverage that used to exist only in community newspapers (which have traditionally carried heavy doses of school news). An official of NBC Cable foresaw growing public interest in learning more about the schools "or any of the things that affect people's pocketbooks, how their children are brought up, and the way people live." As competition between these services and established local stations sharpens, it may be reasonable to expect innovative programming touches and such previously untapped program ideas, among others, as working conditions in the schools, profiles of teachers and administrators, and status reports on student-friendly technology to appear on local screens. An unintended but probably beneficial outcome of such specialization could be a splintering of huge local TV populations into discrete *ad hoc* viewer groups—a development that the cable industry has energetically promoted. By its mere presence, cable is already blasting successfully through the once-solid wall of national loyalty to the network mastodons.

There are still potholes in cable's road to full acceptance as a legitimate media form. The industry is new and largely unregulated. Its services are both expensive and of markedly uneven quality. Although, as television critic Pat Aufderheide asserts, "for now, cable is America's informational highway,"[3] the questionable practices of some of the fast-buck operators who run substantial chunks of the cable industry may cast a pall over its future. Rate-gouging and litigation are common, while the content of some channels insults the intelligence and good taste of consumers.

Perversely, a resumption of greater federal regulation of cable by the mid-1990s could serve to increase output on education and other domestic and local issues. Reregulation, which the cable companies adamantly oppose, would doubtless be framed in terms of affording the public protection from excessive commercialism. Cable system operators would presumably be obliged to provide increased access, and even some tangible assistance, for some community interests and issues. By this reckoning, education could loom large, as it already does in a few areas of the country, in the profile of cable programming.

A good-case script of this sort does not guarantee that a spate of watchable, even innovative, new programs on the schools will instantly appear on cable. Availability, as so many networks, stations, and idea-generators have learned, does not automatically lead to more viewers. By embarrassing margins, television's mass audience still chooses taste-defying situation comedies over the best public affairs programs the medium can produce. And within the cable universe an ever-expanding assortment of new choices—channels for fans of old films, comedy, science fiction, courtrooms, cooking, the country-western world, and countless others—come and go with dismal regularity. The competition is stiff and unforgiving. Education will have trouble surviving as a permanent player.

CHAPTER 9

THE BUSINESS CONNECTION

THE PHENOMENON OF SCHOOLS AND BUSINESS SHARING PEWS IN education's church is contributing a distinctive new dimension to public-private linkages. The rapid growth of these "partnerships" since the mid-1980s suggests common goals and, in time, shared responsibility and accountability. And it raises legitimate questions about whether or how much these widely varied institutional combinations will help the schools to deliver job-qualified, or at least literate and mathematically proficient, young workers to American business. Is this a goal that educators and parents should accept uncritically as the central purpose of our schools? Does it impose unforeseen demands on schools in their quest for greater public understanding and support?

The formation of these alliances is an American phenomenon. Nearly 150,000 business enterprises have attached themselves in some way to the nation's public schools. Many of the ties are loose and insignificant—more or less traditional connections through local business support of sports teams and school clubs, occasional donations of auxiliary equipment, and sponsorships of scholarships. Others have heft. In school after school, corporate scientists teach classes, local or national firms provide cash incentives for outstanding academic performance, and substantial infusions of equipment, often costly computers and business machines, are beginning to be felt. Even though the level of corporate giving to education actually fell in the 1980s, its visibility improved greatly, especially late in the decade, and by 1991 American business had become a key player in policy-framing circles, notably in the Bush Administration's *America 2000* initiative.

One offshoot of the school-business nexus is a heightened awareness by both "partners" that, while not necessarily identical, their interests are intertwined. Today's business leaders who grieve over the

lamentable state of urban, and sometimes suburban and rural, education, are usually in command of most of the facts. If their companies are not directly involved with the schools, they are likely to be contributing members of some kind of Metropolitan Compact for the Schools or Coalition for Quality Education in their area. They know where most of the bodies are buried or being hidden. They have learned to probe beneath the tangles of bureaucracy and press releases to learn how things really work—or don't.

They don't like what they see. The problem for business is not information; it is school performance which, in time, affects the success and profitability of business in a competitive world. This view of education may be one-dimensional, but the dimension, results-focussed productivity, packs a powerful wallop. Whether we like it or not, its promise is why American business still backs our schools.

The path from the school-business connection to the media's treatment of the schools is shorter than it might appear to be. The print and broadcast media that dispense so much of our knowledge of the world around us are, of course, the most visible, audible, and otherwise public part of our corporate culture, complete with its virtues, paradoxes, and complexities. Only a small segment of what we learn daily about public issues and institutions comes from such non-profit sources as public radio and television. As a nation of media addicts, we tend to downgrade or overlook public broadcasting, preferring instead to get the scoop from the more stimulating commercial broadcasters and publishers who consider information to be a salable commodity. When it comes to the schools, the segment of the population that remains loyal to public radio and TV is not the principal force in expanding education's support base. Despite surveys showing that they attract ever larger and more diverse audiences, and not just an intellectual elite, their clientele already constitutes a convinced pro-education constituency. Messages to them are sermons to the choir.

A superficial peek at the corporate movers and shakers of the nation's mass media could easily dishearten education's champions. If the character of the tie between economic power and political orientation were entirely foreseeable and the media went by the script, much of what they say about the schools might be irrationally critical, even destructive. By the normally accepted criteria of big business, public education is anachronistic, nonproductive, wasteful, and even irrelevant. Moreover, it encourages mediocrity and massive overstaffing by time-serving functionaries. Perhaps worst of all, it fosters inattention to basic

goals. By performing much of the work of parents, families, and social agencies, the schools, according to this reasoning, have transformed themselves from centers for learning into ineffective socioeconomic daytime headquarters for children. Altogether a thoroughgoing disaster, would be the assessment of any group of bottom-line-sensitive chief executive officers.

If the media's moguls think this way, they have seldom let on in public. They probably never will because such negativism simply is irrelevant to their universe. Employees of media firms are usually highly literate people with professional journalistic or technical skills, not merely the ability to read a menu or instruction sheet in English. As communications empires become imperial structures combining newspapers, magazines, film companies, television networks and stations, radio stations, and publishing companies into massive conglomerates, their overriding concerns are business-based. The central question is, Can the new arrangement be made lean and profitable? and not, How can we offer a better, more socially responsible product? They judge the content that the individual parts of their empires are to produce and sell in exactly the same fashion. Does the product, whatever it is, catch the waves of public taste? Is it better—or at least more attractive commercially—than that of their competitors? How long will it last as a money-maker? Far more often than not, coverage of the schools focusses, as it should, on the story itself, not on real or imagined biases of publishers or station owners.

This fixation on the plus side of the dollar ledger defines all but a few obscure reaches of today's news media. It does not at all rule out corporate concern over civic responsibility, although it may not leave much wiggle room for it. Nor will the gathering concentrations of communications resources into as few as five to 10 megacorporations by the mid-1990s[1] generate marked changes in how the media cover public matters. Although returns from the still-young media conglomerates may not be available for some years, early evidence suggests that any substantive shifts that occur will be dictated by the same values that dominated the separate parts of these empires when they were independently owned. If education, or any other subject, gets "hot" in 1995, as it did a few years earlier, it will be played until its appeal expires—and probably not for one nanosecond longer.

In a cautionary statement, media analyst Ben Bagdikian wrote, "A corporation dependent on public opinion and governmental policy can call upon its media subsidiaries to help in what the media are clearly able to do—influence public opinion and governmental policy."[2] In most

circumstances, a warning of this kind would raise the specter of economic muscle bullying popular attitudes—or worse. The news media are, after all, private entities that aim their high-powered searchlights at public conduct, notably at the presumed failings of public persons and institutions.

Little historical perspective is required to summon up such examples as Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and the Wedtech scandal—cases that might never have achieved their notoriety without sustained journalistic digging buttressed by supportive editorial policies. Taxpayer-supported public organizations, including the schools, on the other hand, normally find themselves in a defensive stance with few chances for effective rebuttal. As so many public figures have learned, it is unwise, often impossible, to contest the media's version of an event or a policy until long after the impact has been decisively felt.

At first inspection, the schools appear largely immune to serious pressure from the commercial media. At a time when it has been drawing hailstorms of criticism from nearly every other quarter of public opinion, public education enjoys corporate support as a public good even though its performance may fall short of business's criteria. It is a widely accepted axiom that business must help, not destroy. The companies that pay most of the bills of the commercial mass media might sometimes seem to be trying to outdo one another in demonstrating the depth of their commitment to school improvement. The media empires themselves, including such companies as General Electric, which owns the National Broadcasting Company, and Time Warner, the world's largest media firm, are among the business world's generous angels. Investing in children is both a good idea and good business. Everybody wins.

In this setting, education is probably well-situated, even indulged. Though the media appear to be less inhibited in their reportage of education than they are in covering other sectors of the culture, they are careful not to offend at the local level, where a constant barrage of negative messages could influence sales of their products. They are not selling children, teachers, and schools; their concern is with how their automobiles, beer, and shampoo are moving in the market. Supporting education can only make them look good.

Media moguls stoutly assert that they let the chips fall where they may on any subject without qualms or fear of economic consequences—or similar eternal platitudes. At times, the record bears them out. Airplane crashes, oil spills, the disaster at Bhopal—all of these have

received dutifully heavy media play, with frequent mention of the corporate culprits, even though the airlines, Exxon, and Union Carbide were and are major advertisers. Media critics from the political left might legitimately quarrel with the tone of post-disaster reporting, but few would deny that the bulk of the coverage is usually fair and often voluminous.

Far less objective is the media's treatment of even larger continuing calamities like the still-massive incidence of lung cancer and liver damage that cigarette-smoking and the use of alcohol create. Much of the cigarette industry's advertising is pitched indirectly at high school-age children, yet the major media do little to report the story of tobacco's hazards. Though television no longer accepts advertising from the cigarette companies, the weekly *TV Guide*, which circulates 890 million-plus copies annually, receives more than $30 million each year from tobacco advertisements, and is picked up every week by 42 million adults plus more than five million teen-agers.[3] Beer commercials, an enormous revenue source for commercial television, routinely portray handsome and prosperous young men and women, role models for the generation to follow, today's schoolchildren, anticipating life's greatest pleasures while holding or coveting a glass of beer.

Despite their readiness to help public education at the scene, the major companies share a spotty record in backing school-oriented television programming. Sometimes, their role has been admirable, as in the case of the Chrysler Corporation's underwriting of the Public Broadcasting System's five-hour "Learning in America" in 1989 and General Motors' sole (and expensive) sponsorship of "American's Toughest Assignment: Solving the Education Crisis" on CBS in 1990. But these are signal exceptions. The normal corporate practice is to back some of the most insipid, intelligence-defying situation comedies that TV's assembly line can churn out. In the 1990–91 season, American business financed such drivel as "Hull High," in which a sexy young teacher dazzled her students and fellow teachers while serious themes unfolded and students burst into song-and-dance routines; "Ferris Bueller," the misadventures of the nation's least typical high school student; and "Parker Lewis Can't Lose," a Bueller clone. Teachers were usually OK people in these epic sitcoms, but their gross caricatures of bumbling, even malicious, high school administrators insulted an already beleaguered profession that needs bolstering, not ridicule.

The history of the media is sprinkled with examples of the supposed domination by corporate advertisers, government agencies, and

social elites of the content of everything from situation comedies to news coverage and editorial policy. Some of these cases have doubtless been well-grounded, especially in television's earlier times and even today in AM radio and much of print journalism, but coverage of education has not been among them. Political ideology, in particular, is usually absent when business subsidizes educational journalism. Although corporations are deeply worried about the educational shortcomings of the incoming work force, they generally do not permit their naturally conservative inclinations to interfere. What could easily have become a twin-barreled conservative assault on the schools by corporate advertisers in tandem with the media conglomerates that own our major newspapers, magazines, and electronic media has been instead a generally sensible response to the complex problems our schools face.

The business response is nevertheless cautious or at least unadventurous to the extent that the media's product is normally establishment-oriented. Television documentaries sponsored by large firms may portray a wide range of educational issues and settings, but these usually fall within the conventional popular image of public education. While programs and articles often depict different ways of doing things, the central pedagogical elements and patterns of governance that have characterized schools throughout the twentieth century come across as substantially unchanged. Almost entirely overlooked are the expanding sub-culture of Waldorf, Montessori, and other alternative or holistic schooling methods; the varied experience of Catholic and other private day schools; the phenomenon of fundamentalist schools; boarding schools; and the inescapably impressive record of home schooling, which began to attract media attention in the late 1980s.

Within the loose framework of global business, the American news media may constitute a "Private Ministry of Information and Culture," or they may be merely " . . . a private business performing a vital function under a specially protected constitutional status . . ."[5] Ministry or business, their major actors are at the least economically healthy and, in a growing number of cases, hugely profitable. Thomas Winship, the former editor of the *Boston Globe*, has called the nation's newspapers "a cash cow," while Stoler observes that " . . . a broadcast license is . . . tantamount to a license to print money; only bad management or incredibly bad luck keeps TV stations out of the black,"[6] Some "incredibly bad luck"—the recession of the early 1990s—did reduce advertising revenues, but few media outlets went under, and the long-term outlook for large profits remained bright.

Until recently, school people and public education's advocates have been unaccustomed to dealing with possessors of great wealth, whether corporations, foundations, or individuals. It is starting to happen. What makes the convergence unique is that the snowballing relationships are reinforcing and generally unfettered. It is up to the schools to provide an honest and open response to these new sources of support, notably the private media which have provided a virtually free forum for airing education's deeds and travails.

The value of this forum cannot be exaggerated. Though business and the schools may not share identical goals, the readiness of privately-owned media corporations to assume some of the responsibility for communicating education's problems to an often indifferent public can be a powerful weapon for the schools. Whatever its other virtues and shortcomings, the expanding business-school connection helps to legitimize educational issues in ways that most commission reports fail to do. At this level, education needs the connection—badly.

PROFILE

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Emily Sachar's Only Friend, the Bell

THE TITLE OF EMILY SACHAR'S BOOK IS *SHUT UP AND LET THE LADY TEACH*, a Bowdlerized version of what Tameeka, one of her eighth-grade students actually said after a rock had hit teacher Sachar in the head. At the moment, some of the children were sleeping at their desks, others were firing a basketball around the classroom, and a couple were talking of their romances. The room was, as Sachar understated it in her book, "a circus of activity." In other words, a fairly typical class at Walt Whitman Intermediate School (IS 246), Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

Sachar didn't have to be a teacher that fall day in 1988. She had just won the Education Writers Association's Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting for her coverage the previous year of New York City's faltering schools. But as a highly prized reporter for *New York Newsday* in the nation's most competitive journalistic arena, she realized that she had become obsessed with "how many front-page stories I had won, how many times my exclusives were picked up by the wire services or acknowledged by the competition . . . .. as the [1987-1988] school year dragged to an end, the thought of yet another year of press conference double-talk, hyped hot tips, and the same stories about the appalling decline of test scores seemed too oppressive to bear . . . I was ashamed of my pride in this game."

Out of this self-appraisal came a decision few education reporters have ever made. Reasoning that the truly intriguing story was not in the press gallery but in the trenches of inner-city schools, which are usually off-limits to the media, Sachar took the plunge. She spent a school year as a full-time teacher of mathematics in an overcrowded, poorly led, run-down wreck of a former elementary school that should have had no more than 900 students but boasted a population double that size. She had to become the story to get it.

Emily Sachar's bachelor's degree was in economics, not mathematics. She had never taught, not even as a student teacher, nor had she

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been trained for the profession. With relative ease, she became one of 12,000-plus teachers in the New York system who lacked permanent licenses but who, because of a severe shortage, became "temporary per diem" teachers in the largest school system in the country. She also became one of 10,000 in the system who were "out of license"—a bureaucratic euphemism for teaching largely unfamiliar subjects.

In rich detail and with warm sensitivity to the overpowering travails of a school that was barely surviving, *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach* dissects life in public education's lower depths. It is a story of lives earmarked for futility, suffocating administrative nonsense, violence, ceaseless disciplinary crises beyond the imagination of suburban parents or students—and only the rarest of minor triumphs. At the end of an especially frustrating class, writes Sachar, "Thankful that there was one ally I could always rely on, I sat sulking at my desk waiting for a ring from my only friend, the bell."

Sachar does not pretend to have remedies for the ills of urban education. Instead, she systematically lays out what life is like in that separate, grossly unequal world. The story that unfolds from her intimate involvement in the lives of five daily classes of children in their passage to adolescence is devastating. *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach* is not a book about "Our Miss Brooks" and her high-spirited suburban charges; it is a portrait of a large American tragedy.

A few of Sachar's routine frustrations:

- Curricular materials thick with jargon, incomprehensible even to experienced teachers, and totally irrelevant to the needs of middle school students who were achieving, if at all, at elementary student levels.
- A massive multi-layered bureaucracy blindly implementing regulations that seemed designed to hinder rather than spur the teaching-learning mission.
- A disintegrating physical plant, complete with rats and roaches, that fostered violence, induced despair, discouraged students and teachers alike, and was always filthy except when central office school officials came to visit.
- Grading and promotion policies that appeared to reward indifference, poor performance, and even truancy while discouraging rare efforts to achieve excellence.
- High levels of racial tension among different groups of students and within the badly fragmented faculty.
- The cynical assignment to mainstream classes of illiterate and

dysfunctional students, some of whom were brand-new arrivals in the country who could speak no English and had possibly never been to school.

- A system that lost decent teachers because it "didn't distinguish between minimum competency and real talent and energy."

Teaching at IS 246 presented daily ethical dilemmas. How should a classroom teacher react to obscenity-laced speech and dangerous behavior by students who actually wanted to learn? Is it ever, or always, defensible to pass students who perform at nowhere near grade level and seldom do assigned work? How many second, third, or twentieth chances can teachers give students who refuse to work?

It is tempting to claim too much for this remarkable book. Its implications are in the eyes of its beholding readers. For school reformers it should provide uncluttered insights into what really needs doing; for others it may offer graphic proof that some urban schools may be reaching a point of no repair.

For her reporting in *New York Newsday* on her experience at Walt Whitman Intermediate School, Sachar won her second EWA grand prize. Her book is a uniquely fitting record, both of life in education's subbasement and of Emily Sachar's growth as a reporter and thinking professional. But beyond these pluses, ***Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach*** adds importantly to the shamefully thin popular literature on what actually goes on inside America's classrooms. Only Tracy Kidder's ***Among Schoolchildren*** and Samuel Freedman's ***Small Victories*** are in the same league.

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CHAPTER 10

BETWEEN TWO HARD COVERS

WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF CONSUMER ELECTRONICS, NO business in America is undergoing as thorough an upheaval as the tradition-encrusted publishing industry has been experiencing since the mid-1980s. Once an overlooked backwater in the corporate world, book publishing has been a quirky relic of an age that most of us are hard-pressed to recall—a time when love of the printed word and of the book itself stirred the passions of publishers and readers alike. For some in the field, monetary reward was a serendipity, even an embarrassment. Viewed as a business, "book publishing scarcely deserved the word; if any MBAs were watching how books were marketed . . . it was with a mixture of nausea and laughter."[1]

By these measures, what has been happening is an epochal transformation. The superconglomerates, especially the international versions, are taking over. Most of the nation's largest publishing houses have gobbled up the mid-sized firms and have themselves been devoured by well-financed megabusinesses. As the combinations expand, transnational communications giants with holdings in films, newspapers, cassette and disc companies, magazines, television, and radio are coming to dominate the industry. Harper and Row, a great old house with a noble record of taking chances on books on educational issues, thus finds itself renamed HarperCollins and a new item in the portfolio of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation of Australia, which in turn owns the growing Fox Television Network, a host of major newspapers including the *New York Post*, motion picture studios, diverse magazines, and sundry other media properties around the world.

Among the consequences of these mergers and acquisitions are a drop in the number of national publishers and, to the dismay of writers who may be producing very good books en route to the great ones they

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may eventually write, fewer opportunities to get published and to receive the serious recognition and financial reward they deserve. The merger of two houses with annual outputs of 100 books apiece yields a combined company that produces 125–150 titles a year. This does not bode well for books on education.

These sobering factors convey a vision of a megabusiness slipping out of control—or into the wrong hands. Despite an increase in the nation's population of book readers, publishing cannot compete in the same arena as the monsters of American industry and communication. As a "mere" $10 billion industry, its annual net sales are roughly $3 billion, or about as much as the nation spends on turkeys and apples.[2] And the $10 billion figure embraces bibles, encyclopedias, textbooks, and the normal range of mass-market, book club, and trade books. The entire enterprise is dwarfed by at least 50 individual American corporations.[3] It is easy to be impressed by such numbers as 55,000 books published annually, single-book sales that may reach two million copies, thousands of small, even tiny, publishing houses, and a growing number of first-class bookshops that routinely stock over 100,000 titles. As a medium of mass communications in the 1990s, though, the publishing business is a minor actor.

Their recent conquests have doubtless added a certain gloss to the conglomerates' self-image. Paramount Communications is presumably as pleased with its acquisition of the venerable Simon and Schuster as Maxwell Communications of Great Britain is to possess Macmillan of New York or Bertelsmann of Germany is to own Doubleday. But cachet matters little in the fast-paced world of the conglomerates. The name of their game is profit, rapidly gained, and not the gentleman's competition and appealing folk habits that have historically branded the industry. In the argot of the times, the new kids on the block are playing hardball on manmade turf. This is not public education's best surface.

The new publishers live in a world of best-selling, fast-moving blockbusters. They are masterminding a revolution in the profile and working patterns of a respected industry that has been in place, with most of its lore and traditions largely intact, since the nation was settled. Consider these examples of publishing's unique culture:

- The industry still has little capacity for, nor very much interest in, test marketing. Major items go into the stores because of the intuition of a small coterie of publishers and editors that they will sell. John Tebbel, the industry's respected historian, notes

that books are thrown on the market with little or no preliminary research, a minimum of promotion or advertising in most cases, and are left to sink or swim. Small wonder that nearly 80 percent of all published books are commercial failures.[4]

- The vendor of books can return unsold merchandise and usually does. The return rate on hardcover books runs in the 30–40 percent range, while half and sometimes more of the mass-market paperbacks that once filled the shelves of traditional bookstores, large chain outlets, supermarkets, and gift shops find their way to the publishers' warehouses.[5] Shortly thereafter, often in a matter of months, the merchandise may either be destroyed or reappear, often in the same store, at one-fifth to one-half of its original price, a fate that has befallen numerous books on education.
- By the mid-1970s, two huge chains, B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, together with a few regional ones and three or four book clubs, were selling most of the nation's books. Located largely in suburban malls, the chains tend to limit their stock to bestsellers while employing the same hard-sell merchandising tactics as their neighbors who sell clothing, shoes, gourmet foods, and sporting goods.[6] A typical Dalton, Walden, or Crown store may carry fewer than a dozen books on education in an inventory of 8–10,000 titles.
- A few popular authors, principally novelists such as Tom Clancy, Stephen King, and Danielle Steel, can command multimillion dollar advances, and several hundred more regularly receive high five- and six-digit sums. But the overwhelming majority of authors cannot live on their earnings as writers. In a perverse application of economic principle, a highly marketable book by a reliable author of bestsellers may end up on the minus side of the publisher's ledger. Most books sell by word of mouth. Even a massive promotional budget, by the standards of the industry, will not buy 30 seconds of advertising time on "60 Minutes," says industry analyst John Boswell. Thus, when the word-of-mouth grapevine fails for a book that may have produced a two-comma advance, the publisher may suffer irretrievable loss.

Played against this backdrop, the prospects for an assured flow of thoughtful yet appealing books on the schools are less than glittering. Ben Bagdikian contends that book publishing has " . . . a special obligation to maintain a place for ideas, literature, and social analyses that

were unacceptable in the other media .... these more serious and original books have helped society to recognize injustices and failures, to deepen insights and perceptions with which to respond to a changing world."[7] Distressingly, most publishers are no longer stirred to action by such noble sentiments. When Bennett Cerf, a book-loving publisher of the old school who headed Random House, listed his firm's stock on Wall Street, he observed, "We were publishing with one eye and watching our stock with the other."[8] This relentless march for profits inhibits publishing's movers and shakers from taking wild card chances on manuscripts that do not bear an automatic success label. For every unlikely hit such as *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* or *Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (which is not a book about schools), short and simple books by unknown authors, thousands of titles of seemingly equal appeal appear briefly, fail to catch on, and disappear into warehouses, recycling depots, or the remainder racks of discount book stores.

Education has had a few surprise hits even though books about learning and the schools usually have been all but invisible in the major chains. The typical Walden, Dalton or Crown outlet features sections on psychology, science fiction, travel, food and cooking, gardening, business and consumer economics, computers, New Age topics, religion, health, sports, art, self-help, current events, nature—nearly everything but education. The industry's weekly bible, *Publishers Weekly*, periodically tracks these and such other subject clusters as gay and lesbian publishing, but the profession as a whole brackets literature on the schools with books that are essentially instructional and are thus largely unclassifiable. Nevertheless, one noteworthy book about teachers and children, Tracy Kidder's admirable and accessible *Among Schoolchildren*,[9] did gain a Christopher Award and appeared high on bestseller lists in late 1989 and early 1990. But Kidder is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author whose brilliant work on diverse topics inevitably attracts a large reading audience.

In a more rational world, the publishing industry's search for high-profit products should jibe comfortably with the heightened public awareness that the schools are in trouble. It would be reasonable to expect a few contemporary writers and thinkers—authors of the quality and renown of Joan Didion, David Halberstam, Gail Sheehy, Taylor Branch, or James Fallows, for example—to gravitate to intensely human issues that will have a decisive effect on the nation's future. But the marquee names of popular non-fiction writing have steered clear of the

schools. To the extent that a popular literature about them can be said to exist, it appears to consist of two categories: the dark-horse entry, usually by a university professor—E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy*[10] and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*[11] are typical—whose central message is that our system of public education is producing uninformed airheads; or an assortment of highly critical potshots at the schools that show up briefly on commercial shelves but sell poorly.

By most common measures, the books on education that the commercial houses do issue from time to time are at least as presentable as those in other fields. They are well-written and usually succeed in avoiding the debased dialect that used to mar most literature on the schools. Some are underappreciated gems. *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America*,[12] *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews' compassionate description of the famous math teacher's work, which became a moderately successful film, spotlighted a remarkable educator and presumably made a few dollars for its publisher. *Newsweek* called Samuel Freedman's *Small Victories*,[13] which was also conspicuously reviewed in the daily and Sunday *New York Times*, "a powerful tale, beautifully and subtly told, of a system (the New York City public schools) that must content itself with many small victories. And too many defeats."[14] It became a Book of the Month Club selection but never a best-seller. Emily Sachar's *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach*,[15] which appeared in the spring of 1991, covers some of Freedman's ground while focussing on life in one inexcusably run-down intermediate school. Among other current and recent entries, *Lives on the Boundary, the Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*,[16] by Mike Rose, is a singularly compelling analysis of a system the author contends is shortchanging children who were not born to privilege, while Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*[17] vividly captures the essence of the high school teacher's life.

These and a dozen others are top-flight books that should have turned a profit while enlightening a responsible reading public. None are hard going. All are full of graceful language and closely focussed inquiry. In the current heavily competitive book market, however, all but a couple have been lost in the crowd.

Publishers are loath to spend money promoting any but foreordained breadwinners. When authors of books on education pitch their products on radio or television talk/call-in programs, audience ratings rarely hold up, and the hosts are not always comfortable discussing the schools. There is scant evidence that this well-accepted promotional device, which has been enormously beneficial to books on more colorful subjects, has made much difference for literature on schools even

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though most books are eventually sold by the kind of informal publicity that these shows epitomize. Somehow, the verbal grapevine seems to work poorly for books on the schools. Or at least it does not extend far beyond the community of professional educators. If it did, John Goodlad's landmark *A Place Called School*[18] and Gerald Grant's masterful *The World We Created at Hamilton High*[19] would have gained the mass readerships both deserved. Thomas Toch's recounting of the story of school reform, *In the Name of Excellence*,[20] may fare better (but predictions about book sales are notoriously suspect).

Like film and television producers, publishers are on an eternal quest for salable scripts and story ideas. They do not believe that education has provided enough of what they think they can use. The reasons for the shortfall are many. Education is a slow-moving behemoth with chronic, decades-old messages which, let it be repeated, tend to anesthetize and discourage most readers. The schools that the children of the book-reading parents attend are generally among the best in their communities; reading books is not a popular activity in public housing projects or for struggling parents on public assistance. For most readers, the torments of urban schools may require urgent attention, but not from them. The wolf cries from the educational establishment and its legions of critics are "*deja vu* all over again." This does not sell books. Besides, how different are today's schools from what they were when Charles Silberman's portentous *Crisis in the Classroom*[21] hit the best-seller tabulations a generation ago?

When time is available and the discriminating reader feels like revisiting academe, it is more stimulating to dip into Henry Rosovsky's good-natured *The University: An Owner's Manual*,[22] Page Smith's offbeat *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*,[23] or Dinesh D'Souza's assault on the new orthodoxies of higher education.[24] Though ripe for reform, our colleges and universities do not face imminent collapse. Reading about them can transform a dreary winter evening into an intellectually absorbing experience. Not so for reading about schools and the gloom and misery that customarily pervade the literature on them.

The matter of school reform has spawned a dense thicket of mandates, a veritable 40-foot shelf of manifestos, research tracts, and reports by an apparently limitless assortment of commissions, legislative groups, foundations, governmental bodies, policy analysis institutes (think tanks), and assorted scholars and observers. By the late 1980s the thematic current of this outpouring had shifted decisively. No longer did the literature of reform consist solely of a diet of relentless negativ-

ism. Instead, the benumbed policy-maker who had tried to read even a small fraction of this mass could choose from a growing inventory of status reports and prescriptions for change.

But however prescient the work of the authors of second- or third-wave reform agendas may prove to be, they share a disturbing characteristic: With rare exceptions, their publishers are by industry standards relatively small, specialized firms and organizations whose products seldom reach mainstream markets. In early 1990, for example, Jossey-Bass of San Francisco issued Phillip C. Schlechty's estimable *Schools for the 21st Century*[25] and followed it with Rexford Brown's stimulating *Schools of Thought*.[26] The Brookings Institution brought out *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*,[27] a controversial call for schools to compete for students in an open, depoliticized market. Whatever the fate of these well-presented and carefully reasoned books may prove to be, their initial sponsorship doubtless limited their potential for wide public acceptance or even debate. (In a departure from its normal practice, Brookings launched a powerful media campaign, complete with saturation press coverage and national television and radio talk shows and panels, for its entry—an unusual undertaking for a Washington think tank. Reactions to *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* indicate that it is becoming an important force in the debate on parental choice despite criticism that it is an anti-public education polemic.)

Overall, the book publishing industry has done a marginally creditable job of illuminating educational issues. Books on the schools do not attract hordes of buyers. They offer few channels to the profitable tie-ins with the television and film interests that make many best-selling novels and some non-fiction works such attractive risks. Moreover, and possibly most tellingly, they usually feed into an ideological vacuum. By and large, books on educational policy that are targeted at mass audiences expose the purported shortcomings of our public school systems, sometimes as if they were one monolithic entity, and exhort us, someone, anyone, to improve them. The premise that nearly 16,000 individual systems are sinking fast is untenable. But the misconception persists in the pages of what passes for "popular" literature on schools—Chester Finn's *We Must Take Charge* is typical of the genre[28]—and the publishing business deserves some of the guilt for perpetuating it.

The reluctance of the big guns of American punditry and letters to weigh in leaves an unnecessary void in education's public image. The issues simply do not get the lucid explication and commentary that many other fields routinely receive—usually to their benefit. Even eco-

nomics, the dismal science, comes alive when Robert Reich, John Kenneth Galbraith, George Gilder, or William Greider discourses on it at book length. A host of lively books on management epitomized by the hugely successful *In Search of Excellence* by Thomas J. Peters and Thomas H. Waterman Jr., imparted vitality to some of our most routine transactions. David Halberstam's enthusiasm and diligence enliven his accounts of fields as varied as the press, Japanese and American corporate behavior, sports, and the use of political power. And, of course, the impact of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, among many others, furnishes an object lesson on the power of books to influence contemporary public policy. But only rarely do writers of their calibre come close to the schools. Education may be an ubiquitous backdrop to Robert Coles's monumental work on children, which combines a scholar's thoroughness with a journalist's flair, but schools are not its main focus.

Peter Finley Dunne said it first, but Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, usually gets the credit for the expression "all politics is local." So, by and large, is education. Like politics, it is also deeply personal, even when laws and bureaucracies seem to control its every aspect. In contrast to politics, though, education does not have a literature of connectedness, a body of recognizable books that challenge our awareness by converting broad concepts into local issues. Instead, we have reports, hundreds of them, that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said of the educational reports and gatherings of his time, affect us "with a slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws."[29] The schools and their students deserve much better.

CHAPTER 11

MORE THAN A NEWSPAPER, LESS THAN A BOOK

NOTES FROM THE GREAT MAGAZINE SHAKEOUT:

- Racks in bookstores, newsstands, shopping malls, airports, supermarkets, and drug stores that carry from 50 to 400 magazines at a given time, and which cater to a limitless range of tastes and interests, do not customarily display a single copy of any magazine, journal, newspaper, or tabloid on education.
- According to a bimonthly publication called *Factsheet Five*, magazines in circulation in 1990 included, among more than 12,000 others, periodicals called *Festering Brainsore*, *Leukemia, Anyone?*, *Neon Worm*, *American Window Cleaner*, *Big Forehead Express*, and *Balcony of Ignorance*.
- *The New Republic*, *Nation*, and *National Review*, the three best-known journals of opinion in America (the 3N group), boasted a combined circulation of 322,422 in a typical week in 1990; at the same time, the monthly *Reader's Digest* found 16,434,245 buyers, the weekly *TV Guide* attracted 15,867,750, and the bimonthly *Modern Maturity* went to 21,430,990 subscribers and their families.
- When he acquired the spectacularly successful *TV Guide*, media plutocrat Rupert Murdoch reportedly told associates that the weekly was "too thoughtful" and that he wanted "more of a tabloid appearance."

Like the other mass media, the magazine industry exists in a state of perpetual transition. Its singular consistent quality is its inconsistency. The only certainties of a year in magazine-land are that more publications will be available on December 31 than on January 1 and that

some impressive titles—*Ms.*, *Psychology Today*, *Wigwag*, and *7 Days* in 1989–1991, for example—will have bitten the dust or suspended publication. At nearly the same level of predictability is the character of most of the newcomers: specialized, flashy, and trying very hard to survive.

These are not the only troublesome signs for magazines. Revenues from advertising fell sharply in 1990 and 1991 from the high annual levels of the 1980s. Many publications intentionally reduced circulation in order to maintain healthy profits, while others literally bribed new subscribers with watches, cameras, pocket calculators, and sub-cost subscription rates. Many were forced to decrease the number of pages of non-advertising, or editorial, matter. Even more ominous was the trend toward the short takes and glitzy presentational gimmicks of television and *USA Today*. And hovering darkly over a medium that still occupies a large place in the lives of millions of literate Americans was the relentlessly expanding glut of information that cable television and other developing technologies were unleashing.

To too many educated citizens, the magazine was becoming something to dip into on an airplane or in the doctor's waiting room. With newspapers offering more detailed coverage and analytical depth, and a trend toward shorter non-fiction books picking up steam (Whittle Communications' 80–100 page treatments of important subjects by name authors, in books laced with advertisements for Federal Express, was the most prominent example), the future of the non-specialized magazine was, at best, uncertain.

"Consumer" magazines, the 550–600 or so that attract a broadly-based readership, have not usually been public education's best publicists. Perhaps, then, these unpromising trends will mean less to backers of public schooling than appearances suggest. In their totality, popular magazines are scrambling for "impact" stories—marketable, "can't miss" prescriptions for how to afford and live the good life, insider tips on the economy, and the drama of war, natural calamities, and famous people in trouble. Education as editorial content does not stir advertisers or sell magazines. The *New York Times Magazine* may proudly display New York City school Chancellor Joseph Fernandez on its cover, but that unique publication comes automatically as part of the ten-pound Sunday newspaper. Only the most secure (or civic-minded) commercial magazine publisher would risk the predictable dip in single-issue sales that a school-based cover would cause.

Since the beginning of the current wave of educational reform in 1983, the three major newsweeklies—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*—have put what happens in America's schools under close scrutiny. All three have competent education writers who know their way around school corridors and playgrounds. Predictably, they have often been critical, even outraged, by what they have heard and witnessed, but this has not deterred them from some illuminating coverage of promising developments. If not uniformly distinguished, their performance has been creditable and surprisingly balanced at a time of stress in the schools and in the curious realm of the newsweeklies.

But the 1990s may not prove to be the best of times for these once-omnipotent magazines, and, indirectly, for their coverage of education. People are losing the habit of depending on the weeklies. Although their circulation figures remain respectable at a total for the three of roughly ten million, with *Time* far ahead of *Newsweek* and *U.S. News* a distant third, newsstand sales, a crucial indicator of corporate health in the magazine industry, have dropped precipitously since 1968.

More than any other category of magazines, the newsweeklies are caught in a grotesque squeeze. They have become prime victims of their own success, watching semi-helplessly as newspapers, television, talk shows, and weekly insider programs about economics and Washington politics dominate territory that was once their special beat.[1] With the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today* available from coast to coast, and such relatively new services as CNN, C-SPAN, National Public Radio, and the Public Broadcasting Service as handy for most Americans as the kitchen faucet, the Big Three are feverishly redefining themselves.

The three-headed facelift shows signs of sagging. While each weekly has tried to create an individual personality, certain common traits are visible through the catharsis. There is more gossip. Stories are shorter, crisper, and frequently more judgmental. Style and editorial angle are gradually suffocating content. Corporate or cooperative writing is falling out of favor, except at *Time*, where it persists in the major departments. Solo reporting is gaining. Opinion columns are starting to appear.

This repositioning is creating a radically altered role for the weeklies in our incipient information society. Whether the shift will be a sea change or merely a cosmetic adjustment may be crucially important to the publishers, who need desperately to maintain a strong position in a dwindling market, but it matters only marginally to the schools. If attractive human interest-type stories on education come along, the

news magazines will ordinarily run them, particularly if they show a unique twist or spin. But like nearly everything that appear these days in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News*, even the most illuminating stories may be compressed nearly to the vanishing point. Only cover or major feature stories appear to reach more than 700 words. Whatever their future may hold, there is little prospect that the weeklies are destined to add much to what is known about how schools are doing.

At the other end of the spectrum of magazines covering public affairs are the industry's feisty journals of opinion. Something less than models of excellence in design and display technique (long-suffering *Nation* readers jokingly complain of splinters in their fingers after turning its pages), they are chronic losers in the medium's profit-and-loss sweepstakes. They nevertheless make "large social and political waves."[2] Regrettably, though, even by applying a very loose definition and highly permissive accounting—thereby creating a category that would add *The American Spectator*, *Harper's* and *The Atlantic* (which have provided sophisticated material on school matters), *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *Mother Jones*, *The New Leader*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Progressive*, and *Washington Monthly* to the 3N group—the combined circulation of these intellectually nourishing magazines would barely exceed that of *Self* and *Weight Watchers*. Reducing the group to the more manageable 3N plus *Commentary* and *Commonweal*, total paid circulation would settle at slightly more than ten percent of the 3,424,203 buyers who carefully scrutinize each issue of *Playboy*.

Numbers clearly are not the opinion journals' game. The appeal of their various messages is qualitative and intellectual, not quantitative and escapist. They are, in a word, influential. The 3N cluster, in particular, seems impervious to the encroachments of television or to competition from the other print and electronic media. They make no concessions to the national preference for tidy, neatly packaged information bites. Their content ranges from militantly partisan political commentary to cerebral dissections of trends in the arts. Whatever their social and political orientation, all three dig far below the headlines to extract what they consider to be the current meaning and eventual impact of trends and developments that often elude the other media. Unevenly edited and gratuitously cantankerous though they may be, the journals, along with a few syndicated newspaper columns, may be the closest thing to a class act that print journalism can boast. A front-page *Nation* piece in early 1991 by New York City school principal Deborah Meier favoring

public school choice under carefully defined conditions was one of the most probing analyses of this complex subject that has appeared in any national publication.

From one key standpoint, though, the opinion journals have been increasingly negligent. They have generally been indifferent to the schools. Articles like Meier's are rarities. Most of the journals patched together at least one issue spotlighting the plight of public education in the 1980s, and stray articles occasionally pop up, almost as afterthoughts. But the philosophically diverse 3N group has yet to exhibit either the concern or competence in covering education that it demonstrates so emphatically in politics and the arts. What could have been an idea-laden debate in the pages of our most stimulating periodicals has simply not appeared. The rightist *National Review*, *American Spectator*, and *Commentary*, among others, periodically run Chester Finn's eloquent broadsides against the education establishment, but the middle-of-the-road *New Republic*, arguably the meatiest of the journals, has expressed little sustained interest in what happens in and to the schools. When the liberal *Nation* does take a peek at education, the results can be startling. Running against the grain, as it usually does, the country's oldest opinion journal publishes book reviews by teachers and burrows deeply into the real world of urban schools. But all too rarely.

This failure of the journals has deprived the schools of an especially potent discussion forum. These are not "little" magazines in the sense that the term is applied to literary quarterlies and intellectual journals. They are, instead, what many editors, publishers, and government officials stuff into their briefcases when they leave for work in the morning. Television producers and foundation executives read them. The "talking heads" of TV panel shows extract and develop cogent argumentation from them. Members of Congress and their staffs consult them. The *New Republic* and *National Review* are known to be influential in the White House, whatever the political coloration of the President. More than one Washington insider has credited the *National Review*'s true-blue conservatism with helping in a small way to keep the Reagan Administration from falling all the way into the clutches of the radical right.

Occupying a unique niche among American magazines, the business weeklies have embraced educational reform as a high-priority cause. Their straight pitch that the economy requires an educated work force is unassailable. Its simplicity is magnetic. As corporate converts flocked to the education church in the late 1980s, the business magazines found themselves occupying very high ground. In rallying to the

schools, they were promoting civic virtue. At the same time, their fervent appeal for the schools to run themselves as cost-effective, results-oriented organizations struck a solid anti-bureaucratic blow for the effective management their readers espouse. Promoting literacy as a prerequisite for participation in the American dream is a foreordained winner. And the financial returns have not been bad. *Fortune* and *Business Week* have issued advertising-saturated special editions on education. Perhaps most significant, the debatable notion that the main purpose of the nation's schools is to serve as a supplier of humanpower for American business has gained even wider currency than it already enjoyed.

The absence from the magazine scene of a single respectable consumer magazine on K-12 education is puzzling and discouraging. It often seems that magazine publishers have located every conceivable target group and public concern with some kind of marketable periodical. But not education. One can search in vain for the equivalent of the specialized likes of *Foreign Affairs* or *The National Geographic* or *Money* or *Prevention*. Are the schools truly so dull or unattractive as a subject that they cannot motivate a single publisher to take the plunge? The gamble just might pay off.

PROFILE

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Anne Lewis: Writer for the Trade

AS A RANKING DEAN OF EDUCATION'S "IN-HOUSE" COMMUNICATORS, Anne Lewis is ideally situated to judge how well the public schools' three million professionals are informed about their domain. The former editor of *Education USA* and since 1981 the author of the monthly *Phi Delta Kappan*'s influential "Washington Report," Lewis is the "education writers' education writer"—the author of several books on policy matters, a report-writer for foundations and professional groups, and newsletter editor. She is also one of the profession's most respected manuscript-doctors—a gifted wordsmith who shapes the ramblings of educators and conference rapporteurs into clear and compelling prose. If there were no Anne Lewis, to belabor the obvious, education would have to invent one.

Education and educators, says Lewis, suffer from a shortage of self-esteem. And like most Americans, today's school professionals do not reflect fondly on their 12-13 years of public education. For many, they were years of drudgery and of robot-like obedience to mindless regulations, with only occasional intervals of intellectual development. For most of us, this is not a world worth reading about. Devoted though today's educators are to their young charges and to the psychic gratifications of teaching, says Lewis, their curiosity about the stagnant system in which they function is somewhere between dormant and invisible.

It is thus unsurprising that education's trade press lacks depth and vitality. No more than a few hundred of the nation's 2.5 million degree-holding schoolteachers regularly find the time, or have the talent or inclination, to speak their piece in print, even for their own profession. Their entries in trade journals are usually short, instructional-type articles that lack theoretical or intellectual underpinning. They are of roughly the calibre of the material that appears in trade magazines for liquor distributors or the trucking industry. Much of the writing on schools and learning is by education school professors. It is dull, often unspeakably so.

More worrying still, according to Lewis, is the quality of the writing and analysis of education's policy-makers. With rare exceptions, it is banal and self-justifying. Education's people do not want their ideas examined. They are not leaders in a true sense. They readily accept subordination to politicians, business interests, and civic groups. Nor, by and large, are they cerebral individuals; many, indeed, are privately proud that they are not eggheads. Satisfied to meet the demands of the process-oriented systems that employ them, they are not about to venture into print or onto the tube with maverick analytical notions about their work. The typical profile of a respected school superintendent in *Executive Educator* describes a capable, politically savvy operator who would be at home in a corporate executive suite but not, perhaps, as an interpreter of civilization's great ideas.

With this kind of clientele and outlook, education's trade media lag far behind those of comparable fields in depth of analysis and willingness to challenge hallowed dogma. Despite their unyielding use of scientific jargon, journals in the medical field consistently enlighten, sometimes even dazzle, practitioners with timely findings and insights by professional peers. They improve their field. Hopelessly dull though they appear, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Lancet*, to take two publications written by and for doctors and medical researchers, have repeatedly been the initial public sources of trailblazing material on the practice of medicine. The same can be said for trade publications that cover science, the communications media, environmental issues, information sciences, and countless others. But not about those that report on education. A large proportion is unrelievedly boring while repeatedly underestimating the intelligence of their readers.

An ambitious publisher looking to penetrate the huge potential market of school professionals, says Lewis, would be well-advised to move very slowly. Teachers frequently take their work home with them, and they aren't usually interested in more reminders of it. Most administrators and educational politicians, notably legislators and school board members, are neither readers nor magazine-buyers. Perhaps even more telling, it is difficult to corral high-quality writers and identify attention-holding subjects.

If educators themselves don't think learning and schools are worth writing about, in contrast to professionals in other fields, then why bother trying? Some of today's best writing in and for the field comes from such commentators as Larry Cuban, John Chubb, Linda Darling-Hammond, Chester Finn, Gary Orfield, Denis Doyle, Milbrey

McLaughlin, and a handful of others—all affiliated with universities or policy institutes. (Cuban, a Stanford University professor and administrator, has been a superintendent and still teaches occasionally in the public schools.) The authors of the two most popular non-trade books on the schools of recent years, Tracy Kidder (*Among Schoolchildren*) and Samuel Freedman (*Small Victories*), are non-educators.

The monthly *Phi Delta Kappan* (paid circulation: 157,000) and the uniformly superior *Education Week* (49,000), the principal policy-focussed trade publications, frequently reach out to analyze educational alternatives and foreign developments, and *Education Leadership* (35,000) has never been reluctant to make its readers think. With sporadic exceptions, though, the other several hundred national-circulation educational journals and newsletters, usually including the prestigious *Harvard Education Review* and the *Teachers College Record*, persist in treating contemporary issues in crushingly ordinary ways. Anne Lewis laments their failure to draw attention to the rapidly accumulating evidence of successful experimentation that has been occurring in schools in Europe and elsewhere. The critics and statisticians have been comparing our lagging performance with the successes of other nations, but America's education press seldom reports on how the differences developed or on what actually happens in those foreign schools and classrooms.

The surge in both print and broadcast coverage of education since the late 1980s may help to shape a more knowledgeable, education-centered consuming public. But the education professionals who must do the job in the schools are being shortchanged by their own media. Until they can view their work as engaging and stimulating, a turnaround of attitude that may take a generation and drastic new approaches to professional training, they will continue to receive the same uninspired coverage from their house organs that they are getting today. It may be possible for a huge profession to get by without responsible in-house reporting on its affairs, but it is hardly advisable.

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CHAPTER 12

CONSTANT COMPANION, MINOR MEDIUM

NEARLY A DECADE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, THE NATION LEARNED THAT telegraph would one day "whisper to the four corners of the earth with the lordly behests of lordly man." Upon hearing that a "magnetic telegraph" might one day connect Maine to Texas, Henry David Thoreau remarked, " . . . perchance the first news that will leak through the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."[1]

Neither Adelaide nor the prescient Thoreau survived to witness radio's eventual grip on the American public. When the Presidential election returns (Harding over Cox) aired over station KDKA in the medium's first commercial broadcast on November 2, 1920, a new stage in mass communication was at hand. By the 1930s any family able to muster the price of a wireless receiver was listening nightly as the faceless voices of newscasters and commentators named Gabriel Heatter, H.V. Kaltenborn, Fulton Lewis Jr., Floyd Gibbons, and Lowell Thomas told them what had already run, in far more detail and with better balance, in their local afternoon newspapers. On Sundays Walter Winchell tipped an uncritically loyal audience to the virtues of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and J. Edgar Hoover, the latest in cafe society gossip, and the word about the nation's leading criminals.

Then, as now, the schools almost never rated mention. Widely respected and seldom challenged, they were universally held to be an agreeable feature of an otherwise troubled landscape. With war nearing and the Great Depression dominating domestic news, there was little need, and probably less available air time, to criticize one of our most stable institutions. Besides, news on education, such as it was in pre-World War II life, did not appear on the wire service tickers that fed

broadcasters most of the copy that they touched up or, probably more often, read verbatim over the air.

In May 1961 a flamboyant radio personality named Gordon McLendon converted a rock and roll station in Tijuana, Mexico, into a 24-hour news and talk station beamed to a Los Angeles area audience.[2] Unrestrained by federal regulation and thus willing to confront once-untouchable themes, the uninhibited station was the forerunner of much of what we now consider to be information radio.

Thirty years later, a quarter-billion Americans own a half-billion radio sets. Every year we purchase roughly 150 million audio units—home radios, headsets, tape recorder/radio/compact disc combinations, and car radios—of ever-improving quality and design.[3] Nearly three-fourths of these devices are in the home, the rest largely in automobiles or plugged into people's ears.

Radio is ubiquitous. For many people it is as natural to carry or wear a radio set as it is to tote a pocketbook or wallet. Yet the medium appears to serve two essentially limited functions: as a wakeup service for listeners during the six-to-nine a.m. period, and as a music service the rest of the time.[4] Of the nation's approximately 9,200 commercial and 1,400 noncommercial stations, the vast bulk concentrate exclusively on music. Although the radio industry cannot decide whether its output embraces 16, 30, or another mber of major formats, the dominance of music—adult, contempor , country, current hits, "oldies," jazz, and "new age," and, plodding turtle-like far behind them, classical—is unquestioned. In a 16-hour format lineup, stations in the "all news/news talk" category are near the bottom of the pecking order even though they have been scoring solid gains within a nearly insignificant total.[5]

Although radio can reach carefully delineated audiences with laser-like accuracy and efficiency, the listening habits of its audiences may not be as sharply focussed as the data from the medium's marketing wizards would have us believe. Even the most successful entertainment-oriented morning programmers, for example, recognize that music alone may not suffice at breakfast or in a traffic backup, and that a combination of news, road and weather reports, humor, and even political or social commentary is more likely to attract advertisers and hold listeners. Such mixtures are vaguely informative, and, except for sports, business, and the weather, few fields are mentioned more frequently than education. Of course, the mention is often of school closings or late openings. Perhaps that is progress of a sort for the schools.

The growth of talk radio, mostly in metropolitan areas, has often served to spotlight education for audiences that might otherwise have thought little about it. Public education is an ever-present punching bag for hosts, callers, and guest experts. According to Carol Nashe, who helped organize the National Association of Talk Show Hosts in 1989 after a vociferous cadre of hosts led by Jerry Williams of WRKO in Boston had mobilized heavy opposition to a Congressional pay raise (and probably claimed too much credit for its postponement), callers and hosts tend to share a skeptical, even negative, view of today's schools.[6] Of the nation's 900-odd talk show hosts on 500-plus stations, the overwhelming majority male with only a scattering of minority-group origin, most are strongly conservative in their outlook. This orientation probably mirrors that of most station owners; it is reflected in a strongly, often scathingly, voiced distrust of government regulation, affirmative action, and increased taxes. While many individual stations and their owners profess to support community betterment, including drastic school reform, their commentators and call-in show hosts capture the attention of listeners through controversy and confrontation. A hard, results-oriented line on social issues such as education inevitably elicits both.

Local talk radio shows probably do not substantially influence public policy. Sometimes, they are the clear targets of well-orchestrated waves of calls from listeners who have been organized to express a single viewpoint on a single issue—a tactic that issue-focus groups have long used to pressure policy-shaping bodies. Such efforts are usually transparent and misleading in conveying a picture of a large and irate population mobilized, for example, to install prayer in the schools or to remove sex education from the curriculum. The deck often appears stacked against venturesome individual listeners who may, for example, espouse more spending or an end to excessive testing.

The readiness of some hosts to humiliate persons with contrary views, in some cases by insulting their intelligence or cutting them off the air, only reinforces audience perceptions that some viewpoints do not deserve a hearing. It also reinforces the case that most of these programs are essentially show business and do not warrant serious attention by thinking audiences. Typical of the more popular hosts is Rush Limbaugh, whose five million-plus listeners over some 400 stations appear to welcome a daily barrage of boasts, insults, and right-wing pronouncements.

The call-in radio hosts have had a taste of power, and they reach 20 million or so listeners every day. Having contributed to the 1989

ruckus over Congressional pay, they entered the 1990s emboldened to battle on other fronts. With the encouragement of Ralph Nader's Congress Watch, the theme of choice for many of them became the reform of political campaign funding, a gray issue that, according to John Stupak of WBAL in Baltimore, faced a long uphill battle. Extended to its logical, if unlikely conclusion, a crusade to restrict spending and offer more free air time to candidates could indirectly affect the balance and tone of political contests to the possible benefit of the human services. Traditionally, candidates who spend the most to get elected are not the most ardent supporters of such tax-supported institutions as public education. Any effort to reduce the corrupting role of money in politics might thus eventually help the schools. But the Catch 22, says the trade weekly *Broadcasting*, is that stations could thereby lose advertising revenue, a prospect they would never encourage in a sensible world.[7]

Because analysis of the expanding talk show phenomenon is still spotty, judgments as to its effects must be speculative. It is clear, though, that current "top of the news" subjects, as determined largely by television and newspaper coverage, drive most shows and that a sense of what is on the minds of interested listeners does emerge from the less hysterical programs. Judged by these crude criteria, education fares passably well. When such radio personalities as Michael Jackson and Owen Spann of ABC, Mike Cuthbert of WRKO in Boston, and Milt Rosenberg and Roy Leonard of WGN in Chicago tackle any subject, the discussion is usually sensible and informative. Education often makes their agendas. At the local, non-metropolitan level, in particular, it appears to be a subject of serious concern to the citizens who listen to talk radio.

As radio acquires a patina of "infotainment," a self-explanatory descriptor that characterizes much of the coverage of public affairs by television as well, it should follow that its treatment of social and political issues will be spruced up. Listeners are demanding and impatient. They are unlikely to resist a quick turn of the dial when discussions hit barren patches. They know what they want of radio, and the choice of "infotainment" fare is so broad that they can usually locate programs close to their preference. Managers of talk and all-news stations recognize that they are unlikely to hold many viewers for more than 15–20 minutes at a time. Even the more specialized outlets, those that feature business, motivation, religion, or, even programming exclusively for children, prize the variety they build into their daily schedules. The

fledgling Kids Choice Network, for example, provides various kinds of music, call-in shows, trivia quizzes, and news from *The Weekly Reader*.[8]

This quest for a balanced diet has begun to dent much of non-commercial radio. Many of National Public Radio's affiliates, which offer a potentially excellent milieu for presenting education's serious issues and more pressing needs to a receptive audience, have developed attractive, entertainment-slanted personae. They are no longer content to present large segments of filler programming. Frequent revision and closer attunement to listeners' tastes now distinguish many of their agendas. Some offer seemingly unfathomable but successful menus catering to diverse appetites. In Washington, D.C., for example, WAMU features a zany blend of 50 hours weekly of bluegrass and country music, old-time radio drama and comedy, jazz, and 25 hours (plus repeats) of exceptionally rewarding talk radio. The talk show hosts are unusually sensitive to education, and their in-depth treatment of the schools reflects it. Their readiness to steep themselves in the issues and to read the books most of their guests have written imparts uncommon substance to their shows.

The underfunded 20-year-old National Public Radio system, which is not a network but rather a loose hook-up of 431 non-commercial associates, has bucked the tide of the commercial stations. The system has stitched together a trio of 60–90 minute news and feature programs—"Morning Edition," "All Things Considered," and "Weekend Edition"—that deftly combine news, analysis, timely features, interviews, serious commentary, and a range of musical forms. By mid-1991 NPR's "cumes," the cumulative totals of listeners who tune in at least once a week, had reached 12.1 million people, putting it close to the estimated audience for CBS's widely admired twice-daily 15-minute "World News Roundup" shows. And this audience is as worldly as any medium can boast.

While agreeing with this assessment, some critics of NPR contend that the NPR clientele consists of thinkers rather than doers. One-third of NPR's regulars, or almost double the national average for radio listeners, are college graduates and constitute an audience "most notably distinguished by its level of education, professional success, and community involvement."[9] The median education level is 13.8 years versus the national average of 12.3, and, according to the five-class Index of Social Position (ISP) developed by Dr. A. B. Hollingshead of Yale University, NPR's 58 percent male listenership "has 2.3 times the national concentration of people who are classified in the uppermost stratum of five social groups."

National Public Radio's record in airing educational issues has nevertheless been inconsistent. For seven-plus golden years, from 1975 to 1982, though, "Options in Education," a joint production of NPR and the Institute for Educational Leadership, chronicled and analyzed education's story in weekly half-hour programs carried by almost all of the 180–210 stations that then comprised the NPR community. No newsworthy subject was left uncovered by host-reporter John Merrow.

Since the early 1980s, NPR's coverage of the schools has been less thorough, fluctuating between sensitive on-the-scene reporting from around the country and a disturbing lack of vision on crucial policy issues. From time to time, its three top-flight news programs produce brilliant work that demonstrates radio's particular gifts for highlighting worrisome topics. As often as not, however, NPR seems to prefer stories on zither-manufacturing cooperatives in rural Hungary or the hidden delights of collecting hand-carved checkers. Further weakening National Public Radio's potential as an influence-wielder has been a series of poor management decisions, endless financial shortfalls (and frenzied attempts to shore up the system), turmoil in the Washington headquarters office, and an increasing dependence on corporate and subject-focussed support. Even in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, which boasts a huge public affairs-oriented audience, the two stations that carry NPR's programs score only adequately in the competition for ratings.

Radio's potential for building a stronger pro-education constituency is not overwhelming. Some signals are downright discouraging. The inexorable national shift in radio stations from AM to FM, with its clearer sound for music and its attractive commercial prospects, is already severely weakening AM radio, the traditional carrier of most of the medium's non-musical material. With the conspicuous exception of "World News Roundup," which CBS broadcasts over its affiliated stations in the morning and evening (8 a.m. and 6 p.m Eastern Time) and Paul Harvey's crisp daily renditions, network news programs are customarily little more than extended, frequently interrupted sound bites. Analysis and commentary are conspicuously absent. Except for Limbaugh, Mutual Radio's late night "Larry King Live," and a few syndicated or network-based programs dispensing personal or financial advice, little on national radio compels serious attention. King, a masterful interviewer, offers a hospitable atmosphere while lobbing gentle questions to his top-of-the-news or book-promoting guests. When major stations do feature education, it is usually at off hours and is often

confined to the days surrounding the fall school opening or the day or two following the issuance of a major finding or reform report. Typical of the networks' witless scheduling is a back-to-school live hour over ABC Radio in which TV anchorman Peter Jennings and a coterie of experts examine critical issues every year at two o'clock on a midweek afternoon. Who could possibly be listening?

Before television's definitive arrival in the late 1940s the nation devoured nearly everything on radio's dial. Such national icons as Edward R. Murrow, Jack Benny, and Father Coughlin, to name a few of dozens, gained their reputations through the wireless medium. In its absence of print and pictorial images, radio forces the imagination to work. That it has continued to prosper in a television-based culture is a tribute both to its resilience and fortitude, and to the readiness of its poo-bahs to adapt to a smaller but more exacting role in the universe of mass communications. As radio evolves from today's narrowcasting to tomorrow's microcasting, profits will continue to rise, more elaborate headsets will arrive from Asia—and Paul Harvey will remain the medium's most popular dispenser of news and opinion.

We live in a time when, as media historian Mitchell Stephens puts it, "... most of the members of the news audience in the United States now have ready access to more stories than they can remember, more details than they can grasp, more news of the world beyond their communities in a half-hour than many of their ancestors could have expected in a year."[10]

But the chances that commercial, non-talk radio broadcasting will rally to the call for a better-informed public—in all fields, but especially in education—are exceedingly slim. In absolute terms, local radio news is declining. Though full of 60- and 90-second outbursts of headline news throughout the day, it has degenerated into a small footnote to the medium's real business: selling products and services. News departments on AM outlets have been eliminated or drastically reduced, while the operators of music-centered FM stations seem to consider even the briefest newsbreaks to be intrusive and unnecessary.

Commercial radio has never been education's friend. Except for the talk shows, which are at best a mixed blessing, it has chosen to ignore this huge chunk of our national experience—and of our national malaise. We are the poorer for it. And local news, wrote media analyst Ron Powers, "is an endangered program form; it could be extinct within a few years."[11]

CHAPTER 13

MESSAGE PIX GOTTA BE GOOD

"THE PUBLIC WILL BUY 'MESSAGE' PIX," REPORTED *VARIETY* MORE than 40 years ago, "but they gotta be good." The venerable entertainment weekly was right. "Pix" with social and institutional themes can make it in the commercial world, but they are too often heavy-handed and inept. And films on education may experience tougher sledding than most. The acts of teaching and the rhythms of school life usually translate clumsily to dramatic forms.

Education does not always find the film medium to be user-friendly. Yet motion pictures on educational themes, especially those that highlight the quandaries of youth, often score well with the modest audiences that customarily see them—as long as they make no great intellectual demand. For each forgettable clunker it produces, the film industry has put several more than respectable offerings into circulation. No blockbusters yet, but some films of genuine distinction have helped to orient moviegoers to the plight and promise of the schools.

Taken at face value, though, education's labored cadences and narrow range of foreseeable outcomes do not match well with the demands of a medium that, like television, thrives on thrills, violence, romance, and fantasy. When an adventurous filmmaker tries to blend these elements with the routines of classroom life, the results can be disastrous. Typical of such attempts was *The Principal* (1987) in which a well-intentioned young administrator resorted to physical force to quell it. The film was as messy as the violence that ultimately dominated it.

The case against films on school themes is almost too strong for comfort. They seldom attract the financial backing necessary to lure the most talented directors and top-drawing stars into the fold. Employing child actors is risky; many are difficult and unpredictable. Audiences

are so familiar with, and often dulled by, the image of education as the perennial underdog that they are loath to trek to a theater for films that are not guaranteed to entertain or edify and may challenge strongly-held belief systems. Moreover, the prospect of laying out up to $7.00 per person (1991 rates) for 90 minutes of such fare is less than pleasing to most Americans.

Contrary to received wisdom, though, films on education are not always box-office poison. Though the industry has never hungered for screenplays on school themes, it has not discriminated against them and has actually shown more than customary interest in education since national publicity on school problems intensified in 1983. According to analyst Eddie Cockrell of the American Film Institute and National Public Radio, a truly good commercial property will be produced and do well, with or without a message, whatever the subject may be.[1] Even without a prize-winning script, an education-oriented motion picture can succeed on good direction and compelling performances. The riveting portrayal by Morgan Freeman of bat-wielding principal Joe Clark of Eastside High School in Trenton, New Jersey, in "Lean on Me" (1989) was so powerful that it almost overcame an inferior script that badly misrepresented the results of Clark's ham-handed stewardship of the beleaguered school.

Nevertheless, the history of films on education lacks distinction. By themselves, they do not form a distinct type or genre. By most definitions they belong somewhere in a sub-class loosely labeled "social problem films," an anomalous form that inevitably stirs debate in the industry and among critics. As Charles Maland has pointed out, talking about this kind of picture "engages the critic in a long-standing debate about the proper character and social function of movies in American culture."[2] Such films have historically triggered analysis of the tenuous connection between entertaining and informing. To the film business's leaders, these pictures are usually prestige items and thus deserving of respect. But their producers and directors must often wage heated battles for the right to make them.

In a sub-genre that spans such disparate productions as "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" (1939) and "Porky's Revenge" (1985), generalizing about common traits and themes can be misleading. Certain characteristics nonetheless do recur. As a general rule, such movies are formula films in which the good guys, almost always the teachers and students, ultimately carry the day against an oppressive or arbitrary educational establishment. In some instances, though, teachers have been represented as "sex-crazed, vigilantes, and mad scientists," according to Mary

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Tanzy Crume, who cites "arrogant villains such as Richard Vernon of 'The Breakfast Club' (1985), odd ducks such as Miss Balbricker of 'Porky's' (1981) fame, and vigilantes such as Mr. Corrigan of 'Dangerously Close' (1986), who eliminates 'undesirable' lower-class students by using guerrilla-warfare tactics, torture, and murder."[3]

These motion pictures may leave negative impressions on film fans, but their numbers are not statistically impressive. More firmly established in most memories are images of the stalwart characters played by such stars as Robert Donat in "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" (1939), Glenn Ford in "Blackboard Jungle" (1955), Jon Voight in "Conrack" (1974), Nick Nolte in "Teachers" (1984), Mark Harmon in "Summer School" (1987), Edward Olmo in "Stand and Deliver" (1989), and Robin Williams in "Dead Poets Society" (1989). Although it was a largely contrived and simplistic film, "Dead Poets Society" extolled a love of learning and passion for living that are almost never apparent these days in any form of dramatic entertainment. (Note the astonishing lack of female teachers. The industry's rote response for a generation has been that there are insufficient starring properties for women.)

Films on education expose the grit of reality. They convey an intimately personal sense of time and place that has direct connections for the 70–80 million Americans—children, parents, and school employees—who are tied to the schools at a given time and the 240 million who have passed through them. Although such education-related films as "Rock 'n Roll High School" (1979), "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" (1988), and "Lord Love a Duck" (1966) had entertainment value, they cast little light on education as a serious human endeavor. In their separate ways, though, these and a host of others may have contributed something of equal value: an offbeat peek at the sources and extremes of adolescent behavior as filtered through the school ambiance. Two more sober films of the 1980s, "The Breakfast Club" (1987) and "Heathers" (1989), deftly exposed the nightmarish stratification of the culture of American high schools. In the process, they helped to deflate long-held stereotypes of students and teachers as automatically virtuous characters and of schools as barely tolerable warehouses for young people before they encounter the strains of the real world.

The message film, the larger category that subsumes most education-linked movies, does not have a bright tomorrow. "Occasionally, and very occasionally," says film historian David Pirie, "a frustrated filmmaker with something to say and a financier willing to let him say it will break with tradition, and, by dint of inspiring performances, or a gripping story, or sometimes unanimous critical approval, will succeed."[4] This,

regrettably, is what the generals call the "best-case scenario." A position nearer to the industry's consensus was staked out by an astute commentator who said, "The entertainment picture is no place for social, political, and economic argument."[5] Not much has changed in the 50 years since Martin Quigley uttered those words.

The motion picture business has always been feather-tip sensitive to the currents of popular taste. Sometimes it creates them. When baseball came back to life as a national mania in the 1970s and 1980s after a long slumber, such films as "Field of Dreams," "Major League," "The Natural," and "Bull Durham" quickly rode the wave into theaters and, shortly thereafter, video stores. Films about lawyers have enjoyed a similar boom in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It could conceivably happen to education, especially with a proven commercial property of the high quality of Tracy Kidder's best-selling book *Among Schoolchildren* evidently ready as a vehicle for a star actress. A virtuoso performance in a film version of this book or of Emily Sachar's *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach* could help obtain an Academy Award for a name actress while reinforcing public awareness of what teaching in America is all about. Favorable reviews in the print media, good sales and rentals by video outlets, reruns on commercial television—all of these could be of limitless benefit to public education.

This heady prospect has its downside. It is risky to overvalue the direct impact on public policy of films, television, and popular fiction. While some of Vice President Dan Quayle's ideas on military hardware were reportedly shaped by the novels of Tom Clancy, policy-shapers in general are reluctant to give much weight to artificial representations of issues. When the well-meaning film actresses Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, and Sissy Spacek testified before a Congressional committee on an agricultural issue (Fonda liked farms, while the qualifications of the others appeared to have consisted of their roles in films that took place on them), the hearing room was jammed but their statements received little respect. A dramatic film created from a screenwriter's view of things is not a guaranteed contribution to the formation of sensible public policies. But it can help to inform a determinedly uninformed public, and that is reason enough for hope that the film industry will expand its output of consequential but entertaining movies on education.

PROFILE

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Wendy Kopp and Her Teaching Rebels

THROUGHOUT 1990 AND WELL INTO 1991 THE NATIONAL MEDIA WERE entranced by "Teach for America," the brainchild of Wendy Kopp, a 23-year-old Princeton graduate with an appealing idea and personal status as one of *Glamour* magazine's ten women of the year. Loosely based on the Peace Corps model, "Teach for America," which had been the subject of Kopp's senior thesis, proposed to convert recent graduates of upper-bracket liberal arts colleges into full-fledged teachers in hard-pressed areas of the country after a summer's crash orientation to the classroom and educational issues.

Kopp's innovation was an instant media success. Serendipitously, the young entrepreneur proved to be a highly competent spokesperson with an enviable knack for public relations and money-raising. She and "Teach for America" swept through the newsweeklies, the network news shows, the national and urban TV and radio talk shows, the syndicated columns, and the nation's major newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*—all of them uncritically enchanted by a young person with a great idea. And along the way, Kopp and TFA reduced the kitties of some of the nation's most prestigious corporations and foundations by several million dollars. It was a virtuoso performance that drew near-saturation coverage, as these things go, and it won overwhelming editorial-page support.

In its first year "Teach for America" delivered the goods: a corps of 500 bumptious teaching neophytes who counterbalanced their shortfalls in pedagogical technique with their strong, if uneven, command of subject matter, high intelligence, and commitment to a couple of years of working in teacher-short areas, mainly in blighted inner cities. An altogether pleasing prospect for the schools that were lucky enough to snag them and a heartening affirmation that youthful idealism was alive and well in the "gimme" era. Wendy Kopp's saga was a genuine educational success story.

The other shoe was slow to drop. Except for an occasional letter to the editor or mildly questioning op-ed piece—the *New York Times* ran one scathing op-ed attack early in TFA's first year but remained a powerful editorial supporter of the program—Kopp and "Teach for America" enjoyed a nearly uninterrupted romance with the media that will doubtless benefit the project as well as Kopp's future endeavors.

A few months into its first year, though, some of the bloom was off the rose as such media heavyweights as the *Los Angeles Times* began to weigh in with more balanced reckonings of Kopp's enterprise. When viewed on a larger screen, "Teach for America" showed gaps and blemishes that experienced education reporters should have spotted early on.

Far from being an updated variation on Peace Corps themes, TFA was instead a scaled-down rehash of the federally-supported Teacher Corps model of the mid-1960s, a durable teacher training program that was excessively touted as a lead vehicle for reforming the teaching profession (in yet another case of largely uncritical media hype a generation earlier). The lasting Teacher Corps contributions over its 17-year, $500-million life, which "Teach for America's" publicists largely ignored, were in tying teacher training and on-the-job performance to needy local communities, achieving extraordinarily high levels of participation by minority group members, and persuading qualified young people that teaching should be a career field and not a stopover en route to other careers. According to data from an informal 1987 survey, most Teacher Corps interns stayed in the classroom or moved into managerial posts in public education where they have made important contributions.

The news media coverage of "Teach for America" also conveyed mistaken assumptions about teaching and schools that went mostly unchallenged. As James Steffensen, a respected researcher on teacher education, pointed out in *Education Week*, TFA implicitly debased an entire profession. Teaching, the program seemed to be saying, was a poorly staffed "hard times" field that a gang of bright young people facing a poor job market in other fields could turn on its head after a little practice. A duty tour as a teacher could be a two-year apprenticeship to adult life or a pre-career service stint before one tackled the real world.

Only 23 percent of "Teach for America's" entering class viewed it as a possible career (although the percentage rose during the school year as the non-teaching job market offered few good prospects and the attraction of teaching began to sink in). Teaching, in short, did not require much more than native intelligence and a few speedily acquired techniques. The *Wall Street Journal* was even unhappy that Kopp allowed

teacher educators to lecture at the Summer Institute, "Teach for America's" 1990 preservice pedagogical boot camp in California.

One does not have to be a fan of the "inadequate incubators of leadership" known as colleges/schools/faculties/departments of education to sense that the *Journal* was guilt-labeling by association. Even the most informed critics of contemporary teacher education concede that, as Lee Shulman of Stanford University has put it, neither subject mastery nor teaching technique, standing alone, makes for good teaching. Substantive experts who lack pedagogical skill, the ability "to present the same material in a dozen different ways, produce the effective analogies and demonstrations, relate the material to matters of current interest, supplement the textbooks with illustrations from other disciplines, and in general bring life to their teaching," have no business standing before a roomful of children.

As it entered its second year, "Teach for America" remained a media darling, a feel-good story that almost invariably sidetracked the sometimes brutal long-term realities of the teaching profession. And if education-oriented TV viewers hadn't yet caught up with its upbeat message, the indomitable Kopp was ready with a TFA-commissioned one-hour documentary that PBS aired in August 1991. To no one's surprise, "Teach for America" looked pretty good and Ms. Kopp hit the nation's TV screens as a superlative example of enterprising young America at its best. She is surely that and more, but TFA had yet to show that it deserved its media joyride.

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CHAPTER 14

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING IN THE NINETIES

CAPTURING PUBLIC EDUCATION'S MULTI-LAYERED STORY IN ANY NEWS medium remains a frustrating and often unrewarding chore. It is patently not a coveted assignment, and the resulting product has too often been a desultory recounting of standard copy by semi-bored, semi-prepared reporters. Nevertheless, the quality and volume of education reporting rose steadily, if slowly, in the 1980s and into the 1990s, notably since 1987. In some areas of the nation, fuller and more analytical coverage is helping to stimulate public awareness of the case for educational improvement. In a report on how the school systems of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, San Diego, Memphis, Miami, and Atlanta were mobilizing for reform, the Rand Corporation credited press and TV news organizations in the six cites with reporting "in the context of . . . larger priorities and achievements," a far cry from the hit-and-run coverage that has so often typified reporting by all media on urban schools.

More such encomia are possible as both sides come to realize that education is finally becoming a foundation player in the news game. Glamorous or not, it warrants the brighter spotlight it is beginning to get. Harold E. Morse of *The Learning Channel* envisages education as becoming to the 1990s what entrepreneurship was to the 1980s: an accepted national preoccupation. As national security priorities stabilize or wind down and the nation begins to examine its social obligations more closely, says Morse, the schools will continue to move nearer to center stage. Simple and obvious question: Will education's gun-shy leaders make the effort to keep an agenda for children and the schools at the forefront of public attention? And will they comprehend how imperative it will be to master the curious psyche of television, the incredible electronic hulk that is at once ubiquitous, disconnected, changing, and available?

The educational leader who underestimates the power of the media, especially of television, undermines the public support base for the schools. When sophisticated polls repeatedly demonstrate our dependence on television as a central source of information on public issues, it is folly to ignore or ridicule it. It is not only not going away; it is becoming more varied, and probably more useful.

This is old news to politicians, environmentalists, the national security establishment, and the business community. But it is only beginning to penetrate organized education. Many state education officials, superintendents, senior school officials, school board members, and community support groups would still like to kill the messenger. In the 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson, who never mastered television, nevertheless regularly watched the three commercial networks' news programs simultaneously on parallel screens. Were he occupying the White House today, the three would be six or seven: the entertainment networks, CNN, C-SPAN, and a blank or two for whatever new communications miracle happened to be available. His successors at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue have been equally sensitive to the flickering screen and less dependent on print reporting. In 1991 President Bush conceded that television's heart-rending images had led him to an expanded, more humanitarian policy toward Kurdish refugees in Iraq. And he followed developments in the Persian Gulf War on CNN. So did Saddam Hussein.

Bit by bit educational leaders are becoming media-literate. The Rand study of urban school systems noted that four of the six superintendents they interviewed had acted as their own press relations officers and that none had flinched from discussing some of the less savory features of the local education scene. This explicit acknowledgment that direct top-level involvement combined with candor helps rather than harms the schools' case and image is a long-overdue milestone in school-media relations.

As one of the society's largest employee groups, educators tend to assume that their professional belief codes and collective slant on educational matters enjoy popular acceptance as sensible, mainstream values on schooling. This premise may be valid much of the time, but the assumptions of the education professions and their leaders are not Holy Writ to reporters, who revel in spotting intellectual shallowness, pretentiousness, and above all, jargon. Faced with one, they will usually uncover the others. When educators speak in their own insiders' language to large audiences—even 1,000 viewers of a local community cable station's weekly visit to the schools constitute a very large audience by most standards—they are harming their cause. The media

dislike swallowing anyone's story whole, especially if it is presented dogmatically or deviously in a semi-alien tongue.

In an ideal world, the education community would be an easily identifiable segment of our social and political behavior. As such, it would present something akin to an *ad hoc* popular front or coalition beyond its own beltway. We know better. Along almost every conceivable axis, education's house is as divided as the Pentagon's. In Washington, where nearly all of the major professional and advocacy groups are now berthed, the only subject that is certain to unite them is money. They frequently, and often bitterly, part company when other key issues arise. The Bush-Alexander version of school reform appeared destined in mid-1991 to lead to a major national debate between supporters of reform from within and those advocating a massive popular crusade, led by politicians and policy analysts, to change the way American education works.

Such schisms are a natural part of life in a complex endeavor and are usually constructive in the long run. But they probably do not help the media to present an unbiased rendering of the always complicated world of educational policy. They make it difficult for educators to "come out fighting, show the dynamic potential of the schools, and stop being on the defensive," as Robert Lichter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs suggests.

If the media mean to do a fuller, more balanced job of reporting on education, they must possess the necessary horsepower. The sketchiness of much reporting and the "ground zero" approach it often takes on educational issues could be greatly reduced if networks, local stations, and newspapers were to acquire respectable in-house expertness. A growing population of educational specialists and big-picture analysts is available for the asking. They know their business and most would relish the association (a splendid résumé item), even as unpaid consultants. The regular newspaper reader or TV viewer with an interest in school news cannot escape the conclusion that often overworked reporters do insufficient research and that their rolodexes carry an unchanging roster of knowledgeable contact persons.

School leaders and policy strategists are old hands at talking to newspaper and TV reporters. Many have become polished troupers, sure of themselves, their arguments, and their presentational competence. They speak in sound and sight bites. So the same ones come back, month after month. Readers and viewers become accustomed to, and often bored by, them. The "media dozen" of the reform era of the 1980s are becoming tired faces and voices, not unlike the national

security gurus who populate "Nightline" and the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour." It is time for education to nurture and unleash a new generation of expert analysts and spokespersons, women and minority group members in particular, who are more closely representative of the public schools than their predecessors. Teachers and principals are expert and experienced performers; they are on stage all day. Even now the schools may be harboring the next wave of undiscovered publicists. They should not be hard to find.

The onset of the 1990s found contradictory pressures barraging public education and the media. Thousands of schools were faltering—we still don't know how many—yet the resources, first-class talents, and public will to shore them up were only unevenly available. The huge population that acknowledged the problem in principle was unwilling to reconcile itself to the modest sacrifices of time, critical thinking, and hard cash that correcting it would demand. Yet the mass media's mandarins, the men (95 percent of them) who support every pro-learning appeal that appears in their in-boxes and on their answering machines, have only lukewarmly backed the fresh, contextual reporting that could help to goad the nation into action.

When was it ever not thus? We cherish local control of public education and private control of the press. These may be clashing, non-negotiable givens, but we wouldn't have it any other way. But they raise questions. Should school people, who are, after all, government employees or elected officials, try to influence the agendas of the for-profit media? Or is current coverage of schools and learning about right? Can the difficult meeting of schools, media, and consuming public evolve into the familiar convergence that so many other endeavors and their constituents enjoy? Equally germane, are the mass media obliged to press for educational change on the basis of insufficiently examined evidence?

To overuse an unoriginal expression, there are no easy answers. Central issues of school-media compatibility—in approach, pace, and two-way understanding—may actually work to distance the media from the schools even though many of their key purposes are similar or complementary. In a rational scheme of things, these titans should coexist snugly, feeding off one another to the benefit of both.

But certain facts of life may subvert this prospect. One of the main intruders is the ever-widening gap between the rates of change of the two monsters. The media are transforming themselves at a much speedier pace than are the schools, which are still experimenting tenta-

tively at the perimeters of change. A thorough reshaping of the child-school-community connection is either not in the fortune teller's crystal ball or is too distant to boast a discernible shape. For every community that is trying new ways, a half-dozen are making only token moves to change, while others are standing pat or showing signs of regression. Far from keeping pace with the times, some political and educational leaders, often with the explicit endorsement of their communities and the media, are seasoning their call for reform with a nostalgic itch for a return to the modern equivalents of the McGuffey's Readers and the one-room school house on the village green. Too, the indecisive voice of voters in the 1990 elections on funding education at what its professionals consider to be appropriate levels hardly provided momentum for the sweeping changes that reformers were promoting so vigorously.

As communications technology, on the other hand, advances at stupefying speed, the odds are shifting for the years ahead. The one certainty, by now an overworked cliché, about the media is that once-unimaginable shifts in their basic character and structure are occurring. Unlike education, which specializes in such borderline deceptive terms as "restructuring," "site-based management," and "choice" (all of which are happening, but at widely scattered locations and often in diluted forms), the media are capable of delivering almost exactly what their managers and scientists promise.

What is visible on the horizon stuns the imagination. Even if schools were to report sudden progress in student mastery of mathematics and science or a massive unlocking of the key to critical thinking skills, such achievements would barely begin to match those of the swiftly expanding communications and information media. The prospects of fiber-optic technology, new satellite networks and configurations, interactive and multimedia variations, and the impending combinations of computers, TV, and telephones, to mention only a handful of the items on the media's schedule for the 1990s, promise to revolutionize an already dynamic chunk of American life.

The new technologies could spur tighter links between schools and their media messengers, but they probably won't, at least not for a long time. If history provides useful guidance, education's rulers and the members of their courts are likely to be skeptical of them as tools for transmitting education's story to a demanding public. School leaders usually gravitate to the politically advantageous bandwagon, but they might miss this one. The gap between words and deeds could be expanding, especially as regards technology. School superintendents, to take a key educational policy group, favor introducing computers into their

districts and, at the same time, expanding their students' global awareness, two unexceptionable objectives for all schools. But interviews with several dozen superintendents yielded only a handful who had bothered to master simple word-processing or to learn a second language. Are these people likely to enthuse over and exploit new forms of communication with the larger community?

It is probably unfair to single out one of several categories of policy-level educational leaders for failing to embrace technologies that are not yet in general use. It is not unfair, though, to wonder why public education's major proponents have failed so far to apply popular methods that have scored so well for other fields.

A near-classic example is direct mail, a venerable medium that has been modernized through technology and the increasingly sophisticated data of demography. But despite its demonstrated record, direct mail appeals have played a negligible role in rallying public support for learning at a crucial time for our schools. Writing in *Utne Reader*, Herb Chao Gunther of the Public Media Center asserts that direct mail is one of the most effective ways of "reaching like-minded people and organizing them into constituencies . . . one of the best and most affordable tools we have." In addition to countless successes at all stops on the political map, direct mail has "created important national constituencies on civil rights, civil liberties, political prisoners, women's rights, environmental protection, reproductive choice, rain forests, endangered species, political reform, Central America, handgun control, disarmament, children's rights, racial hatred, famine relief, proactive health care, farmworkers, animal cruelty, South Africa, public television, consumer advocacy, and drunk driving."[1] Note the absence of schools, literacy, learning, or any side of educational reform. And Gunther's listing numbers only "progressive" causes. Richard Viguerie, the Virginia-based pioneer in political cause-type direct mail, could possibly eclipse it with a recital of his firm's success in advancing a conservative political agenda.

The case for using direct mail to mobilize public sentiment on the schools could hardly be more compelling. In field after field, national lobbies and advocacy groups have created powerful communities of caring, like-minded people. The home mailbox, according to Peter Bahouth and Andre Carothers, has become a public square, "a lifeline for the growth and preservation of the nation's ailing tradition of citizen involvement in public issues."[2] Treated as a communications medium in a democracy rather than as a short cut for peddling merchandise (it can legitimately be both, of course), direct mail offers citizens choices for action on their collective behalf. Religion, the right to bear or ban

arms, the needs of the aged, campaign finance reform—all of these and dozens of others at all stops on the ideological spectrum have received sustenance and more through the well-targeted use of direct mail techniques by the organizations that espouse them.

But not education. Nearly a decade into the longest-lasting reform push of the twentieth century, education's legions of backers have no major advocacy organization to call their own. No national committees, no equivalents of the National Rifle Association or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, no broadly-based non-professional coalitions—no one, in short, to help rally the latent support and stir the national conversation that school improvement needs. The three largest education organizations—the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National PTA—won't do. Though they send stimulating messages about schooling to a large non-professional public, mostly through newspaper advertisements masquerading as columns of commentary, the first two are limited-membership trade unions with an understandable focus on promoting the interests of their members. The third has yet to reach a mass public. A vastly changed body from the loose collection of unquestioning, almost obsequious local groups that specialized in bazaars and bake sales for the schools' slush funds, the PTA has undergone a thorough revitalization. But its public image as an inconsequential presence in school affairs at the level of national policy is proving difficult to dislodge.

The conventional explanation for this lack of popular activism is that education is a local matter. The action that counts takes place in our cities and towns, not inside the Washington beltway or in the corridors of corporate or political power. But the future of our schools has also evolved into a national concern, a status that persuaded even the most dedicated strict constructionists to abandon their almost sacred belief that the Founding Fathers knew what they were doing when they kept education from federal control. Even while in office in the mid-1980s, former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett was designing and publicizing model curricula for all of the nation's schools. His chief ideological lieutenant, who had spoken out vigorously in 1979 and 1980 against the creation of a U.S. Department of Education, underwent a similar conversion as he took to expounding on the merits of a national curriculum and became a campaigner for national standards and tests of subject mastery. If any doubt about education as a national issue lingered beyond the departure of the Reagan Administration, it was decisively erased when George Bush dubbed himself an "Education

President" and warmly backed the "crusade" of Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander to "reinvent" the nation's schools.

The much-ballyhooed "technologization" of the classroom will probably receive a mixed reception. Supporters of no-limits technology will be dissatisfied, as some already are, that budgetary strain, weak commitment, and a tenacious devotion to outdated methods will probably stall the inevitable transformation of school-based learning. Traditionalists will be appalled at the prospect of watching their children turn into machine-operators.

Both will be right, and both will be wrong. At erratic rates and with diverse levels of commitment, our school systems will ultimately obtain the machines and techniques that have become part of our national life. There will be many winners and few losers. But adults with connections to the schools will have to make significant adjustments: to the new information-generating and communications devices that American schoolchildren (but not enough of their parents and teachers) are mastering, to the attitudes that accompany them, and to the prospect that the upheavals of the 1990s will be a preview of the twenty-first century's startling coming attractions.

Since the invention of the telephone, the vacuum tube, and the silicon chip, we have nearly always seemed to be at the cusp of astonishing, life-enhancing breakthroughs in the way we learn and communicate. Tired though it may be, this refrain may be more relevant today than ever before. We have finally persuaded ourselves that schoolchildren must have access to the best of the newest miracles. It is time now for school-oriented adults to come up to speed on how children are and will be learning. No less important is the need to develop parallel ways for citizens of a democracy that still supports public education to stay abreast of the institutions, curricular content, forces for change, and school climate that will determine how learning is to happen in schools of the very near future.

Some of the new technologies are already at hand, so many, indeed, that consumers face daily overdoses of information. Though our culture values learning (even if supporting evidence is sometimes elusive), we are increasingly reluctant to absorb it in trite, dull, and duplicative forms. Sensitive to consumer preferences and competitive pressures, the traditional mass media—newspapers, magazines, books, radio, film, and television—have expended prodigious effort to enliven and modernize their products. The serious reader may prefer the voluminous *New York Times* to the tabloid Boston *Herald*, but even the good gray *Times*

now offers positively jaunty and irreverent treatments of many once-hallowed subjects.

Soon all of them, from the mighty *Los Angeles Times* to the under-subscribed community access TV station in Anytown, USA, will have to find ways to coexist with or become part of new combinations and variations, some of which are beginning to appear in our schools and in corporate enterprises. As what Alvin Toffler calls the "demassification" of the media progresses, mass audiences appear headed for a breakup "into segments and subgroups, each receiving a different configuration of programs and messages via traditional TV, cable, satellite, VCR, and, soon, interactive hybrids of video and computer. Along with this has come a vast expansion of the sheer amount of imagery transmitted by television in the form of both news and entertainment."[3]

This unprecedented combination of finely calibrated specialization with huge globs of information through television, abetted by fiber-optic technology, is revolutionary. One foreseeable spinoff from the evolving combinations will be a huge expansion of personalized "narrow-casting." Machines that will probably come within the financial reach of most Americans toward the end of this century would have incalculable effects on how we live, learn, and work. George Gilder, an unabashed promoter of an alliance between the microchip (computer) and fiber optics (telephones of the future), contends in *Life After Television* that this partnership alone will spawn endless possibilities for two-way personal video communication. Among the workable ideas: "Create a school in your home that offers the nation's best teachers imparting the moral, cultural, and religious values you cherish .... Have your doctor make house calls without leaving his office .... Watch movies or television programs from any station or digital data base in the world reachable by telephone lines. Order and instantly receive magazines, books, or other publications from almost anywhere in the world, edited to your own taste ..."[4]

Undergirding Gilder's agenda is a vision of liberation from "the centralized influence of mass media .... from programs regulated by bureaucrats, chosen by a small elite of broadcasting professionals, and governed by the need to target the lowest common denominator of public interests."[5] The vision may flout current trends, but it has unmistakable appeal, especially in tightening the links between places of learning and a population that needs to know more about them.

The leap from Toffler and Gilder to the stylized arena of contemporary popular music appears broader than it is. But with their talk of "demassification" and decentralized, non-bureaucratic forms of communication, the futurists and forecasters are conjuring up a world in which

new ways to communicate will be everywhere. One such way may be the music of youth, a constantly changing mass medium that has become a central force in the lives of millions of young Americans. It is consistently underrated as a strong current in the flow of popular culture.

From Bob Dylan and Joan Baez to today's often overwrought performers, waves of musical icons have helped form national attitudes. Spanning radio, television (with its impressionable and lucrative MTV component), concerts, clubs, the retail world of cassettes, compact discs, and records, as well as a flourishing community of magazines and a growing list of high-volume books, the Gargantuan pop music industry is a powerful catalyst in our culture. The music of alienation and protest has been ubiquitous since the 1960s.

Whatever the artistic merits of folk and rock music and their progeny may be, their lyrics have resonated clearly to the strains of anomie in their youthful followers—and may even have created them. While learning and schools seldom receive more than a casual nod, the larger themes of much current music are tightly linked to the concerns of children, parents, and school children.

In the landscape of youth music, freedom and pleasure come first. Adults are passé, or figures of ridicule. Authority and structure are beneath contempt, consigned to a well-deserved purgatory. Curiously, it is usually OK to cherish the environment (which the previous generation of money-mad authority figures—parents and their peers—had befouled) but unpopular and unwise to value the intellect. Even in the kinder, gentler 1990s, as one musical satirist commented, "A mind is a terrible thing."

Not all groups echo the hopelessness of Jim Morrison or Suicidal Tendencies. By the end of the 1980s, many young people were turning from music's nihilists to artists trumpeting less destructive, even positive, themes. Though little of today's music is rooted in contexts reminiscent of the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement, some of it has begun to criticize what drugs, advertising, environmental ignorance, and divorce have done to our society. A kind of Rubicon was crossed when the *New York Times* reported a visit to a Harlem middle school of the noted rapper M.C. Hammer, who told a group of rapt seventh-graders that graduation was important. This was revealed wisdom to some. Inspiration comes in many forms. When Fonzie of the TV situation comedy "Happy Days" applied for a library card, librarians across the country reported a deluge of new business from young people.

Perhaps in the 1990s more musicians and performing artists will note that the mental processes that go into composing a song and its

lyrics may have been nurtured and sharpened in an unlikely place: school. Should that ever happen, and the airwaves reverberate to such hypothetical hits as "Get Some Learnin', Baby" or "Gotta Make the School Scene," the consequences for American education would be impressive.

There is no shortage of exciting possibilities for getting education's messages across. Before too long, we will have magazines that talk, headlines by laser, fully interactive, no-glitch high-definition television, anchors in 3D, and post-cable video systems of 500-plus channels. The central question: Will these and hundreds of other developing technological miracles ever persuade the two-thirds of the electorate who failed to vote in 1990, or the millions of parents who never speak to their children's teachers, that we must all participate if our schools are to do a proper job? And that we can't participate usefully unless we know what is going on?

It doesn't cost anything to suggest an array of tempting new media configurations for education. The list of possibilities is endless, starting with all-education radio stations, specially targeted national media events, mass consumption newspapers and magazines on education capable of matching the *Wall Street Journal* or *Sports Illustrated*, more mass-market books of the quality of Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*,[6] an appeal to songwriters to include schools and learning on their list of approved themes, the enlistment of respected personalities (General Schwarzkopf, Jane Pauley, Patrick Ewing) to make education their main public cause, and dozens more. All would help to create the national consciousness that is still lacking in the early 1990s.

The schools and the media may never be an entirely comfortable fit, but each can do better to meet the other's needs. The schools need more open, capable, and appealing communicators, which bureaucracies don't usually produce, while the media must assign stronger, better informed reporters to deal with them. The school story requires creative, venturesome journalism by honest practitioners, not rote reporting by press release and reform report. Both sides can do it.

EPILOGUE

AS THE *AMERICA 2000* CRUSADE PICKED UP MOMENTUM, ISSUE-FOCUSSED debate flourished in the nation's opinion-shaping newspapers and magazines. Discussion of the new strategy's main content—school choice, national testing, and the role of business in public education—materialized repeatedly on front and editorial pages, and, for a few weeks, on the more responsible radio talk shows and weekly TV panel programs.

Within a month of its April 1991 unveiling, though, the coverage of the Bush-Alexander plan was providing a vivid case study of the chasm separating print from broadcast journalism. The major urban dailies continued to feature lively commentary throughout the summer, while the newsweeklies, opinion journals, and upscale consumer magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* (which coldly denounced *America 2000*) accorded unprecedented attention to school policy issues.

But the broadcast media were less dedicated, as the collective mind of radio and television turned elsewhere. Although President and Mrs. Bush captured the media spotlight with dutiful visits to schools and Secretary Alexander criss-crossed the country evangelizing for *America 2000*, school reform drew little notice as a news and talk show staple on radio. Weeks passed with only routine attention by television. Lacking visual appeal and originality, even a new Presidential view of education displayed limited durability as a broadcast theme. Not until late in the summer did it resurface during the ritual annual coverage that the networks, PBS, and CNN grant the schools during back-to-school week.

Though the print media churned out a heavy volume of analysis, professional educators kept their opinions out of the mainstream media, preferring to react, if at all, at conferences of peers and in trade publications. Unsurprisingly, their absence from the emerging public colloquy tilted the content of the debate toward the educational ideology of the originators of *America 2000*, a brainy and expressive cadre of true-believing policy analysts with a suspicion of government in general and public education in particular.

Well before the beginning of the 1991–92 school year, the new strategy began to encounter stormy waters. A *New York Times* story headed "A Sea of Doubt Swells Around Bush's Education Policy" typified "morning-after" coverage as the spotlight focussed directly on the plan's most controversial core proposal: expanding parental choice to embrace private schools. The *Milwaukee Journal* captioned a critical editorial "The Deceptively Simple Appeal of Choice," the *Boston Globe* titled an op-ed piece "But Students Lose Out," and a column by business leader Owen Butler, former head of the influential Committee for Economic Development, that appeared in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, among others, was headed "Doubts About School Vouchers." Arrayed against these demurrers were the less critical views that appeared mostly in conservative, small-city papers with limited circulation. The potent *Wall Street Journal* remained a staunch *America 2000* backer.

From Day One of *America 2000*, Secretary Alexander stressed that it was an initiative for the decade and not a quick-fix cure for ailments of the moment. Even against this backdrop, the print media were quick to spot trouble. When the plan's New American Schools Development Corporation began to solicit $150–200 million from large businesses to advance the program's research agenda, some newspapers worried about a possible diversion of funds from the normal flow of corporate dollars to the schools. The Administration's response was formulaic and defensive.

Even as doubts about *America 2000* accumulated, commentators said nice things about Secretary Alexander. Elizabeth Drew of *The New Yorker* wrote in August that, while "the program seemed to evanesce before one's very eyes—prey to oversell, anecdotalism, and pork-barrelling," Alexander enjoyed wide respect and appeared "to be doing the best he can with the limited resources he's been given." *Time* and *Parade* offered positive cover stories on the Secretary. Robert Samuelson led off a *Newsweek* column headed "The School Reform Scam" with the observation that Alexander was "a charming man" while the same magazine's glib Conventional Wisdom Watch commented earlier, "Wash. swoons over Ed. chief. Lamar, honey, you're on the CW honor roll."

The fate of *America 2000* may not be decided, as the Secretary has warned, until the start of the third millennium. But the media's treatment of it has been instructive along several axes. Opinion did not divide along partisan political lines; the liberal or middle-of-the-road press frequently supported portions of the script, while backing by the more conservative media outlets was far from unanimous. By taking its plan to the nation, over the heads of public education's leaders, and by

developing well-publicized, if somewhat ephemeral, "partnerships" with states and localities, the Administration may have locked in continued, if uneven, play by local and regional media. And the steady drumbeat of op-ed and talk-show criticism of the still-silent education bureaucracies by the new *America 2000* establishment could only contribute to a further erosion of the public's confidence in school leadership.

The big winner may prove to be Lamar Alexander. In what may become the signal outcome of the media's reporting on *America 2000*, this ambitious politician-turned-bureaucrat gained a level of favorable national recognition that would surely have eluded him had he remained in Tennessee. As a low-cost weapon, *America 2000* had the potential to advance two partisan political objectives: the reelection of George Bush in 1992 and the positioning of Lamar Alexander for 1996.

A groundswell of media support for the New Education Order may develop in time—or possibly not at all. Viewed as an example of the school-media connection, though, the promotion of *America 2000* was a mini-classic. Never since Lyndon Johnson's time had a Presidential administration courted the media so assiduously in behalf of an educational cause, especially for one that literary critic Jonathan Yardley called "all air bubbles." The consequent coverage even legitimated such once-delicate subjects as private school choice and the possible takeover of normal governmental functions by business interests. Whatever the quality of the reporting and editorial analysis, or of the new educational blueprint itself, education was no longer an afterthought in the media's corridors of power.

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